

PRESS ANY KEY



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A Short Story Anthology

Edited by Katarzyna Bazarnik  
and Renata Strzok

**korporacja** ha!art

*Press Any Key. A Short Story Anthology*

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Review: Dr Michał Palmowski

Research supervisor: Dr Katarzyna Bazarnik

Language editing and proofreading: dr Ewa Kowal, Guy Torr,  
Renata Strzok, Jacek Krawczyk

Edited by Katarzyna Bazarnik, Renata Strzok

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Pl. Szczepański 3a

31-011 Kraków

tel. +48 (12) 422 81 98, 606 303 850

mail: [korporacja@ha.art.pl](mailto:korporacja@ha.art.pl)

<http://www.ha.art.pl/>

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<http://www.ha.art.pl/sklep/>

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*Renata Strzok*

## Editor's Note

The idea for the second short story competition to be organized by the Creative Writing Section of the Association of Students of English sprung up among its members during a Christmas meeting in December 2015. The competition, announced in January 2016, called for short fiction stories referring in content and/or form to any of the following keyboard keys: INSERT, SHIFT, CONTROL, ALT, DELETE, ESCAPE, ENTER, HOME, BACKSPACE, and SPACE, and was addressed to college and university students who are not native English speakers. The aim was to encourage the exploration of English as a language in which to express one's literary interests, competence and, of course, creativity.

By April 20<sup>th</sup>, the organizers received 17 submissions. After an initial review to eliminate texts which did not comply with the rules and regulations of the competition, or showed an inadequate level of English, 14 stories were sent to the jury. The jury comprised: literary scholar, translator, and writer dr Katarzyna Bazarnik; translator and writer Anna Filipek; literary and translation scholar prof. dr hab. Marta Marzec-Gibińska; editor and translator Aleksandra Malecka; literary scholar and writer dr Michał Palmowski, English instructor and proofreader Guy Torr, and a representative of the Creative Writing Section Tomasz Trela.

On May 26<sup>th</sup>, the jury gathered to discuss the submitted stories and choose the best ones for publication. It was pointed out that in some of the stories, the connection to the selected key seemed strained, but the jury appreciated how many of them showed a surprisingly high level of linguistic and literary competence. The resulting selection of 11 stories is a mix of different themes and genres. However, a tendency towards showing fantastical worlds can be distinguished in many of them, which inspired the topic of the critical essay “Realism vs Fantasy: Exploration of Readers’ Perception” written by two members of the Creative Writing Section, Alicja Lasak and Katarzyna Biela. More insight into the selection of the winning stories of the Press Any Key competition is provided in the following Jury’s Commentary.



## Jury's Commentary

We would like to start by complementing everybody involved in the competition. The general idea of using various keys of the computer keyboard as incentive to invention and inspiration (a surprising alliteration, isn't it?) has proven challenging but fruitful, so we were again faced with a very difficult task of recommending stories for publication. All contestants, no matter how successful, got a wonderful chance to write something other than a boring exercise on an appointed topic; all had an opportunity to exercise their English and their imagination at the same time; and last, but not least, all had something interesting to offer. To quote Szyborska, all have had a share of the joy of creation. Not everybody is a Philip Sidney, but everybody tried to seek,

fit words to paint the blackest face of woe,  
Studying inventions fine, [our] wits to entertain:  
Oft turning others' leaves, to see if thence would flow  
Some fresh and fruitful showers upon [their] sun-burn'd  
brain.

Some of the best short stories boast excellent English; others have unusual, witty and intelligent plots; all winners taught us what surprising functions may be ascribed to function keys which we take for granted in our everyday banging of the keyboards. It might

have been the association with the latest communication technology that inspired nearly all the authors to develop narratives that can be categorized as fantasy or science fiction, or are clearly coloured by features of the genres. (This, in turn, has prompted the topic of the critical essay complementing the anthology.) Inventing fantastic worlds calls for inventing names for all their features unknown in realistic settings. In such stories, temporal relationships may be also unexpectedly complex. Perhaps this was responsible for occasional awkward lexical or grammatical choices, but on the whole most of the authors have managed to steer round these difficulties pretty successfully (in other cases the necessary language editing has smoothed out most of such lapses). Though none of the stories turned out to be a clear favourite, a few of them scored several votes. These include “The Shopkeeper” and “Angelology 101” (four votes), as well as “The Voyage” and “How the Crows’ Shift Put an End to the Anthropocene” (three votes). “A Vicious Circle” and “Rusty” received two votes each, and the remaining stories were supported by single votes.

If a single story in the volume was to be selected as the most unsettling one, the award would certainly go to “The Shopkeeper”. The persuasive imagery of the story haunts the reader long after the last punctuation mark, quite adequately disturbing him or her in the sleep. Its fresh and enticing style matches the imagery; mysterious, alluring, and obnoxious at the same

time, it reveals the author's gift for depiction. Although the story may tend towards too explicit didacticism in warning the reader against trading reality for dreams, it is still very successful on the visual level, leaving a deep impression on anyone who visits this unsettling alternative reality.

"Angelology 101" was praised as the wittiest and the most entertaining. Although it may not be a new idea to explore the angel's life, the motif is approached in a refreshing manner. The story is well paced and full of linguistic flair. It sparkles with humour, and offers persuasive, tangible imagery. Technically speaking, it is a success, and a highly enjoyable story. It is also clever in conceptual terms, innovatively adapting the 'backspace' key to its own purposes. The one reservation that might be voiced rests in the title: is the Orwellian '101' actually necessary to the meaning of the story?

"How the Crows' Shift Put an End to the Anthropocene" proves interesting conceptually in its futuristic depiction of human civilisation on Mars, interstellar journeys, and various technical developments and inventions. Evidently inspired by Lem's writings, the story constructs its sci-fi reality with diligence, meticulously crafting the tiniest details. It is, however, not the details that prove the most striking, but the general idea of an incursive civilisation that does not arrive from some distant corner of the Universe, but on the contrary, grows quietly by our side on our very own planet. It manages to hold the reader's attention

throughout, although the use of footnotes somewhat slows down the reading; but this is obviously a deliberate device, not unusual in this type of fantasy/science fiction writing.

“The Voyage” is characterised by good complexity in construction and a solid and well-chosen lexical resource. The skilfully woven narrative, with sparse, but highly significant dialogue is a real pleasure to read. It raises the always valid question of whether success and development are related to one’s career and financial upgrade. Although the irreconcilable clash between a middle-aged man who has learnt to appreciate non-financial gains and a young upstart who is still focused on career-oriented success may appear conventional, the story gains a new depth with the introduction of a lost daughter and the metaphor of the journey.

“Rusty” presents us with an interesting imaginary world, with its futuristic, post-apocalyptic mixture of images, invented accents stylised as futuristic speech, and complicated subplots. Although we must admit that the linguistic side of the story has left us with mixed feelings, the reader is drawn to the world of the story, simultaneously attractive and repulsive, scary and fascinating—just as many dreams about the future that border on nightmares. Ultimately, it was this vivid, though disturbing, vision that has counterbalanced our reservations.

“A Vicious Circle” is another sci-fi story full of blazing starships and talking robots. It has the edge of

both a thriller and detective story, and a potential for keeping the reader on the edge of his or her seat to the very last page. Although the suspense and tension build up slowly over long stretches of text, the story lightens the mood with a healthy dose of humour. Apart from the main plotline (solving the mystery of the abandoned starship), the main interest rests in the bitter-sweet relationship of the aged couple, adding warmth and humour to the story as a whole.

“Crimson” presents the reader with a 21<sup>st</sup>-century Gothic story—modern vampires employed at a blood-manufacturing company, head-hunting (or rather blood-hunting?) for the post of a “food scientist who would be willing to work as a quality manager for [the] products.” The dynamics between the two images: the traditional, black-coated, long-toothed Dracula and a modern-day, blood-starved scientist in a white coat propel the whole story, and the reader is left as much bewildered as the main character. The dialogues also flow with an excellent sense of humour—although the metaphor of a blood-thirsty corporation that demands full submission and an eradication of the self may be much grimmer than the light-hearted surface of the story suggests at first sight.

“The Phone Calls” is an interesting and thought-provoking tale with good pace and an unpredictable ending. The timing and rhythm are well maintained, meaning that the pages turn themselves. The internal monologue may be read as an exploration of how

a ghost may perceive the reality of life he no longer belongs to. While the monologue found in the recorder leaves the reader with some gaps, it specifies the tiniest details of other situations, adding realism to the erratic thoughts of the protagonist, and engaging the audience.

“Control” has good linear direction so one wants to read on. The hypnotisers featuring in it lure into a trance not only a bus driver, but also the reader who keeps guessing the outcome. Although the story is based on a familiar plot structure, it is told in an enjoyable manner.

“A Runaway” is another well-paced story, a psychologically believable glimpse into the anorexic mind. Its main asset is the idea of giving voice to meal ingredients—and a loud and decided voice it is. We observe the main character’s internal battle with affliction as tasty tomatoes, toast, lettuce, eggs and other treats shout over one another, trying to win her attention. The ending is plausible, meaning that all the various threads come together into a neat knot to be mentally untied. One to chew over after completion.

Closing the anthology is “Insert the Galaxies,” characterised by good turns of phrase, apt metaphors, similes, and astute lexical choices, which gives a natural feel to the prose and makes it an entertaining read. It opens on an intriguing note, with the carefully crafted, vivid, alienating description of a man’s eyes. Although the usage of keys on the computer keyboard may appear somewhat contrived, the story keeps the readers

guessing, surprising them with unexpected twists, and consequently it finishes all too soon—always the sign of a good read.

We close our reflections on the anthologised stories convinced that the readers will find them as entertaining as we did.

*Katarzyna Bazarnik, Anna Filipiek, Marta Gibińska-Marzec, Aleksandra Małecka, Michał Palmowski, Guy Torr and Tomasz Trela*





Emilia Tolkaczew  
**The Shopkeeper**

It is unclear how the Man found the shop. Perhaps it was the shop who found the Man. Whichever the case, their meeting is far from incidental, even though the circumstances surrounding it may suggest otherwise: it is a bright summer afternoon, and the Man is strolling through the town with his wife-to-be, enjoying a brief respite from their usual responsibilities. The shop can rarely be seen on such days, hardly ever there unless needed, but when the Man throws a glance across the street it awaits to catch his gaze in a spiderweb of dancing lights. Its wooden façade is pale and smoothed with age, and the sign above its door too faded to be read, but it is the display window that invariably attracts the attention of all those who are meant to see it. It appears to be filled entirely with light, or rather rows and rows of shifting, gleaming objects ... indistinguishable from the distance, or perhaps indistinguishable at all, formless wisps of light and shadow chasing each other around. The Man, like many others, pauses to stare. There is something incredibly alluring in the shop's quiet presence, something that makes him think of the deep sea, murky, dark water and fish mouths full of teeth.

But then there's his fiancée tugging at his arm, and the reality tugging at his senses. The Man turns, his curiosity flicking away along with the lights, melting into the

crowd as he leaves the shop behind his back. He soon forgets seeing it altogether, swept away by the tide of his life and content with where it carries him.

But the shop does not forget seeing the Man.

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A long time passes before they meet again. It is late autumn, and the evening falls dark and heavy around the Man as he walks home after finishing the day's work. It is rather cold, even for this time of the year, and the skies are bleeding out with rain. The Man's thoughts feel as heavy as the drenched coat on his shoulders. Everything in his life seems to be progressing smoothly—and yet he is plagued by the most unusual feeling of unease, as though all of his late prosperity only foretold that much harsher fall. He is too good of an opportunity for the shop to miss this time; it is not every day that such a rare morsel stumbles its way past its shining bait. And so the Man is snatched right off the street, so fast that he doesn't even notice the light-filled display window before he's pushing the doorknob.

A bell chimes when he opens the door, and then chimes again as it swings closed behind his back. It is very quiet inside the shop. Everything here is made of glass or wood, old but stored with care and undamaged. Sunlight streams in through the front window, ricocheting off glass jars and bottles lined up on display and splattering all around like golden paint. Whatever is inside the bottles twitches and shifts without pause. The light ripples with shadows, bounces off the walls

and blinks into the Man's eyes in a constant, erratic dance. He approaches the shelves as if drawn towards them. The wooden floor dips soundlessly under his feet. Silence seeps through the pores of his skin and settles in his lungs with every breath. The shop dangles its bait and the Man follows.

He hesitates for a fraction of a second, but then leans over the nearest shelf. The light is almost too bright to bear, and he has to narrow his eyes against it before he sees: a neon-blue butterfly is fluttering in the bottle, restlessly beating its wings against the glass. The Man straightens, unsure how to react. Surely this is not a proper way to store a living butterfly. And yet the shelves seem to be stuffed with them, butterflies in all sizes and colors and every single one of them in motion. None of them emits any light on its own, of course, but it is their movement that cuts through the sunlight and throws the shadows into their dance.

But whereas the butterflies are what the shop puts on display, they are not, in fact, what the shop sells. When the Man turns, he notices other objects laid out to be appraised by potential customers. There is a long glass case running through the middle of the room, and when the Man peers inside it, he sees a forest of tiny trees. Some of them seem to shudder under his gaze, as though there is something moving under the cover of their branches. A flock of miniscule birds takes flight from their crowns to circle in the air like a roused cloud of dust.

Further in, he sees a rather old-fashioned cabinet housing a collection of small jars. Each of them holds a different spider, but as they are all particularly nasty-looking, the Man decides not to inspect them any closer. His eyes roam until they find something more enjoyable to look at: an enormous glass sphere seemingly filled with water, in which two fish chase each other's tails in slow, hypnotic circles. Their calm, regular movements are strangely captivating, and the Man reaches out, dream-like, to put his hand against the glass. It's warm. The shop is very quiet. The fish circle each other without pause. Black and white. Night and day. Dreaming and—

“Are you interested in buying this one?” comes a voice and the Man startles so badly he nearly knocks the sphere off its pedestal. He turns around to see a shopkeeper's desk stuffed in the opposite corner of the shop, and the shopkeeper himself smiling at him from behind it. His face looks rather young, but somehow he appears to be just as old and worn down as the shop itself. Most of the color seems to have faded from his hair; his skin is taut and stretched tight from one jutting bone to another. He looks ... sickly, underfed-thin, nearly drowning in a ridiculously oversized, green parka that hangs loosely on his bony shoulders, and although his smile is very polite, it carries no real meaning or emotion. If he closed his eyes, the Man could mistake him for a corpse. But his eyes ... his eyes are the strangest thing yet, dark brown speckled with gold, sharp and

attentive, as though all the life force that was left in his body focused solely in his gaze.

“I’m terribly sorry, but it’s only available for our most devoted patrons. I would never dare to sell it for a starter. Perhaps you should consider one of these instead.” The shopkeeper’s bony hand emerges from under the desk, lax like the hand of a puppet pulled on strings, to wave in the general direction of the display window. “These are our most popular starters. Very light and pleasant, or so I’m told.”

The Man throws an anxious glance at the shelves. The idea of owning a butterfly in a bottle does not appeal to him at all. At the same time he is very aware of the shopkeeper observing his every move, which for some reason makes him rather nervous.

“Would you like me to recommend a specific one?” the shopkeeper asks after a beat of silence. He appears to be used to customers struggling to find the right words. “There is no need to be embarrassed. Finding one’s preference takes time, so it is quite natural to feel a bit lost during the first few visits.”

At last, the Man finds his voice. “Oh, no, I’m not here to buy anything,” he says, but the shopkeeper’s smile only widens.

“Forgive me for saying so, sir, but this is quite unlikely. Impossible, even. I understand your confusion, but if you take your time and choose carefully, you *will* leave here with a satisfactory purchase. Please—” he adds when the Man opens his mouth to reject the offer,

and although his voice is still quiet and gentle with courtesy, there is a sudden hint of steel to it. “—I insist.”

A trick of light makes his strange eyes gleam like glass. Somehow, the Man feels it is better not to argue.

“What are you selling here, anyway?” he asks instead, taking a few steps towards the back of the shop, where rows of tall shelves gradually melt into darkness. The display window seems to be the only source of light, and although the shop is not big, the shelves seem to be enough of an obstruction to drown this section in deep shadow. Once the Man delves between them, he feels like he’s entered a different world. The contents of the shelves grow more dusty and cluttered with his every step. Even the shopkeeper’s voice becomes strangely distant, so that the Man has to strain his ears to hear the answer to his question.

“Dreams, of course. Best around, too. Nothing like those cheap little fantasies you can buy in chain shops. All of our products are natural, and come in a variety of themes. Quality and quantity is our motto—why settle for just one of the two? Whatever you would dream of, we have it, and we have the best of it you can find.”

The Man pauses. He has half a mind to turn around and rag the shopkeeper for making fun of him, but the idea fades away into numbness and leaves him feeling vaguely ... odd. He frowns. His head is full of cotton thoughts that refuse to come together. Everything around him—the shop, the vendor, the lights—feels unreal, like it’s reaching him from somewhere far away.

Here, in the dark section of the shop, the sensation is particularly strong. It is as though the darkness formed a cocoon to separate him from reality ... or perhaps it is the shop that is a cocoon, and a careless step is all it would take for it to burst like an overripe fruit. The thought, although quite surreal, is strangely unsettling. Suddenly close to panic, the Man snatches a random bottle from one of the shelves and hurries back to the counter. Once there, he stuffs the bottle roughly into the shopkeeper's hand; his skin is dry and gives off no warmth, but his fingers curl around the glass with the gentleness of a lover. The moment feels oddly intimate, and the Man averts his gaze on impulse.

"Ah," the shopkeeper says. "An adventurous choice. Quite reasonable, though, considering the expenses. Bear with me for a moment, please, so that I can pack it for you..."

He wraps the bottle in brown paper and hands it back to the Man over the counter. "Oh, that won't be necessary," he adds when the Man reaches for his wallet. "The payment has already been extracted from your account."

The Man wants to reply, but his tongue doesn't quite listen. The feeling of estrangement has returned. His thoughts are a static noise, and the floor dips softly under his feet when he walks towards the exit. It's like walking on spiderweb, he thinks, and then he thinks he sees the shop shift and move with the lights—only it stays in place, or maybe it doesn't, or there is no place at all for it to stay in.

The shopkeeper's voice catches him in the doorway, whisper-soft: "Come again" is what he says, but when the Man turns to look at him, the door closes abruptly in his face and he's left alone in the rain.

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There is a centipede in the bottle.

It's shifting and turning in its confinement, the bottle being much too small for its thick, shiny body, striped with flexing shadows where the segments overlap. Its legs are twitching, scrabbling against the glass. Once the Man sees it, he drops the bottle with a strangled sound of disgust. It cracks against the floor, and when he picks it up again, the centipede is gone.

It returns in the dead of the night to crawl through his mind and dip its many legs into the crevices of his brain, digging up the worst little thoughts, the most hateful visions. No matter how he struggles, the nightmares keep him firmly in their grip until the rising sun chases them away.

He calls in sick that day, determined to return to the shop and demand answers. With the cracked bottle in hand, he roams the streets for hours on end—but the shop is nowhere to be found. Perhaps it is simply because the Man cannot recall its exact location. Eventually, he gives up on the search and decides to put the matter behind him. He throws the cracked bottle into one of the trashcans on his way home. His frustration is not as easy to discard, though, and so the shop remains unfound for a few more weeks.



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Their next meeting is a mediatory one, at last on the grounds of mutual interest. The Man leaves his workplace earlier than usual and has nothing planned for the afternoon, aside from worrying about his employment. His performance at work is as good as ever, but the company itself seems to be receiving fewer commissions as of late, and today is not the first time he's been sent home early. When the shop winks at him from around the corner with its gleaming display window, he almost welcomes the distraction.

The bell chimes when he opens the door, and the shopkeeper smiles at him from behind his desk as though his expression hasn't changed once since they last saw each other. The atmosphere in the shop is that of quiet composure, exactly how the Man remembers it. Even the hazy feeling of being asleep or underwater returns.

"Welcome back, sir," the shopkeeper says, and instead of looking around like he did last time, the Man goes straight towards him. There is something new in the shop this time, after all, or perhaps just something he didn't notice during his last visit: a wire cage sits atop of the shopkeeper's desk, and a strange bird is looking at him from behind the bars. Its feathers are pale-brown, not unlike the shopkeeper's hair, and its beak is oddly big compared to the rest of its body. Once he reaches the desk, the Man feels rather wary of the creature. Its eyes seem to be just a bit too intelligent.

"I want to talk about what you sold me," he says, and the shopkeeper's smile widens. The bird clicks its beak.

"Was the nightmare not satisfactory?"

"You knew it was a nightmare, then?"

"Why of course. I know all the dreams we sell... although, admittedly, they adapt to the mind of the dreamer to a surprising extent. This one was among our older products, and those tend to be a little rough around the edges, but I assumed—" he pauses and blinks, cocking his head to the side. The bird mimics the motion. "Ah—were you perhaps unaware of the nature of the dream you chose, sir?"

Although reason tells him that he's the one in the right, the Man feels ashamed of his own ignorance in the matter. "Well, I've never been here before," he mutters apologetically, and the shopkeeper sighs.

"Perhaps I should have warned you... but if it was a nightmare you chose, it was undoubtedly what you needed at the time. It is often better to let newcomers choose their dreams intuitively like that. Nevertheless, I'm loath to think it might have affected your opinion on our establishment." He pushes his chair back without a sound and stands up, gesturing for the Man to follow him between the shelves. "If you please, allow me to personally assist you with choosing the next dream from our collection."

Buying yet another dream was not quite what the Man had in mind when he entered the shop. Now that he is here, though, the atmosphere of this place is already working its magic on his mind, and he does not have it in him to refuse. After all, it is only fair that he

gives the shopkeeper the opportunity to make amends. And so they spend a quiet moment wandering among the shelves, and the Man listens carefully as the shopkeeper explains the qualities of several dreams to him before they settle on his next purchase. When he leaves the shop shortly thereafter, he finds that he is looking forward to falling asleep and seeing what the night has in store for him.

The dream picked with the shopkeeper's assistance is a Persian cat. It does not arrive immediately like the nightmare did, but takes its time wandering around the edges of the Man's awareness, its bushy tail weaving patterns of dust in its wake. The Man follows it throughout a great portion of the night, but eventually grows weary of the chase and stops. Only then does the dream approach him directly, and curls on his knees into a warm, soft ball of comfort. Although the night is nothing but uneventful, the Man wakes up feeling reinforced and returns to work with less fear in his heart.

But all too quickly the positive effects of the dream wear off and he finds himself thinking about the shop again.

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He does not have to wait long for an opportunity to return—after all, it is easy to find a reason to steal away when he is actively searching for one. His life has already fallen back into the safe routine that he used to find comforting, but that does not seem to be enough for him anymore; and so, barely a week after his last

dreaming escapade, he spots the shop in one of the back alleys he passes every morning on his way to work. He glances at his watch, and decides that he has just enough time to drop by.

He exchanges greetings with the shopkeeper and dives between the shelves. The shadowed section of the shop is full of whispers. Now that he knows how to recognize the nature of the dreams by their image, searching for the right one among the dusted jars and vials feels a little bit like a treasure hunt. Time dances right out of the Man's reach along with the lights and shades. When he stumbles out of the shop, he is almost an hour late for work—but the paper-wound bottle in his pocket is worth every second of his boss's disapproval.

And just like that, it becomes a habit.

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The Man's new interest in dreaming is quite innocent at first, easy to integrate into the flow of his days. He visits the shop once a month—sometimes even less often—and the dreams he buys are light, fleeting things he can simply sleep through and forget. Sometimes, if he has a moment to spare, the Man lags behind to chat with the shopkeeper. Although calling them friends would be quite a stretch, they develop something akin to camaraderie.

For quite some time the Man's life follows this rhythm without a hitch. That is, until the wheel of fortune turns and he runs out of his designated portion of luck ... or, as it seems, his wife does.

His visits to the shop become more frequent. One for every positive test, at first. Then one for every doctor's appointment, and then one for every sleepless night spent on worrying. In a situation such as this one, everyone would need a getaway of some sort (or so he tells himself), and it is only natural for him to seek solace among the faded wood and dancing lights of the shop. He has to be strong, after all, strong for his family and their shared future, and the dreams help him recover whatever strength he burns off throughout the day.

In his heart of hearts, though, he cannot help but feel like he's running away.

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"Have you ever felt like it is reality you trade for the dreams?"

The shopkeeper's eyes are wide when he looks up from the bottle he's been packing. He blinks at the Man, once, twice. He does not seem to understand.

And then the bird laughs.

It throws its head back and cackles madly into the quiet air of the shop. The sound is startling in its peculiarity, and the Man feels very strongly that it is directed at him and him alone. As absurd as it might seem, the bird is laughing at him. He does not know how to react.

Finally, the shopkeeper allows himself a short chuckle as well, and the bird falls silent. "I'm terribly sorry, sir, but I am not really entitled to an opinion," the shopkeeper says. "Seeing as I do not dream myself, that is."

“You don’t have any dreams?” the Man inquires, puzzled, and the shopkeeper shakes his head no.

“How could I? I *sell* dreams. It is rather natural that I cannot *have* them at the same time, is it not?”

The Man takes a few moments to process this information. It occurs to him that a certain sort of boundary between the two of them has just been breached. Neither of them ever asked about the other’s personal matters before. But the shopkeeper does not seem perturbed by the topic of their conversation, so the Man decides to press a little further.

“Don’t you miss it? I mean—” The sharpness of the shopkeeper’s gaze makes him rather uneasy. “You sit here all day, surrounded by all those wonderful dreams. Don’t you ever want to try some of them out?”

The shopkeeper and his bird exchange glances. “Ah,” the shopkeeper says. The bird clicks its beak. “No. Not at all. In fact—” he turns his eyes to the Man again and smiles, surprisingly genuine compared to his usual, professionally blank expression. “I happen to be of the opinion that dreamers experience reality all the more severely, which is not something I would wish upon myself.”

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As time passes and the Man’s life spirals more and more out of control, he learns that there is more truth in the shopkeeper’s words than he initially assumed. It becomes difficult for him to focus on his daily duties. His mind runs home when he works, and so whatever

task he busies himself with, his heart is not in it; but as he returns to the apartment he and his wife share, he cannot stop thinking about the mistakes he made at work. It is like there are two voices arguing for priorities in his head, and he flees from them both whenever he slips into the shop. For a few blessed moments his world narrows to the dancing lights, silence and dust, and glass bottles crowding the shelves, the shopkeeper's strange bird observing him from behind the bars of its cage, and his even stranger eyes filled with flaked gold. In those moments, the Man feels almost like he could share the shop's quiet composure, absorb it, make it his own and carry it out into his crumbling life. But the sensation leaves him immediately when he closes the door behind his back.

Now the dreams feel like stealing droplets of this much-needed calm, never quite enough to carry him throughout the stretch of time between one shopping session and another. And so his visits grow more frequent still, so much so that he appears in the shop every other day. The quality of the dreams he brings home also changes: they feel somewhat heavier now, more difficult to shake in the morning. He shows up late for work, time and again. He can hear his coworkers whispering behind his back. That, too, is reason enough for him to retreat among the dusty shelves and glass vials. Almost anything seems to be enough, these days.

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Now that he visits the shop that much more often, he meets other patrons perusing its wares. Although their presence alone does not disturb him, it feels odd to him that other people might know of the shop and its value. He is almost ready to believe they are illusions or ghosts, appearing alive in this place but fading out of existence as soon as they leave. Sometimes he catches himself wondering if this theory applies to him as well.

Once, upon entering the shop, he sees the shopkeeper talking to a young girl. She seems startled by the Man's sudden appearance, though, and immediately hurries to leave. He holds the door for her, and she throws him a fleeting, frightened glance as she passes by, tugging the sleeves of her sweater low over her hands. A pair of thick glasses makes her eyes look very big and very hollow.

"Isn't she a bit too young for this?" he asks the shopkeeper afterwards, and earns himself another cackling fit from the bird.

"There is no age limit to dreaming, sir," the shopkeeper answers. "Indeed, you would be surprised if you knew how many young lives we save with our service."

It is only an hour or so later, when the Man is about to leave, that he notices a trail of tiny, red droplets the girl left in her wake. He thinks he understands.

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The Man barely notices the change when it comes. His life still consists of reconciling work, family and dream-



ing, but slowly, very slowly, the focus of it begins to shift. Before he knows it, he no longer uses the dreams as a source of strength to deal with his responsibilities: it is his daily life that becomes expendable. Every waking hour feels wasteful. Even as he opens his eyes in the morning, he is already impatiently awaiting another night. He looks forward to every dream, every stolen second of peace...and the eagerness makes him reckless. He becomes less thoughtful in his choice of dreams. Eventually, he chooses wrong.

The dream he picks is longer than usual, he knows that much. It's not too difficult to judge its duration by the size of the creature in the glass container. He can go to sleep early, though, and the opportunity to spend more time dreaming is too appealing to pass. It cannot be too long, can it? The shopkeeper would not sell him something that could be harmful, after all.

He sleeps for twenty hours.

Needless to say, neither his boss nor his wife are happy with that development. She almost calls an ambulance, and although he manages to persuade her that there is no need, she insists that he at least books a doctor's appointment. The Man promises to do so, even though he has no intention to. Their budget has certainly seen better days.

After that incident, he decides to stop visiting the shop. With the cost of his wife's treatment, he absolutely cannot afford to lose his job, not to mention damaging his own health in any way. In his heart of

hearts, he is frightened of how much power the shop has gained over him. Just when did he let himself become so addicted to it? No more of this, though. Somehow, he will have to manage without dreaming.

And so he manages for a week. Then for two. Then three. He does not sleep well. Simply falling asleep becomes a challenge, and if he does, his nights are hollow. He does not dream. Perhaps his mind has forgotten how.

The absence of the shop in his life does not help in any way. His wife's health is still deteriorating. Granted, he does not think about the dreams while he works—but his thoughts run to the image of her thinning hair and translucent skin instead, circling around the possibility of her death without ever touching it. There must be something he can do. There must be something *someone* can do.

All the while, huddled in one back alley or another, the shop waits.

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The night he returns to the shop is rainy and cold—not unlike the night of his first visit. The Man stops in front of the display window, watching the lights play tag across the shelves as if hypnotized. He is too wary to go inside. He wants to go inside so much it hurts.

The chime of the bell startles him out of his reverie, and he turns towards the door to see the young girl jump out of the shop and onto the rain-flooded sidewalk. She spots him as well and waves. Her smile is wide

and very out of place. Before the Man has a chance to process it, though, she turns and runs away, waving her hands over her head as though trying to deflect the raindrops before they land on her hair. He almost gives in to the urge to smile as well.

“Ah, good evening, sir!” The shopkeeper appears in the open door and greets the Man with a wave. “It has been a while! I must say I was quite worried about you, especially after that last purchase. Are you here to buy something new?”

“Not really,” the Man answers. He cannot say for sure, since the rain is clouding his vision, but he’s almost sure that the shopkeeper is fidgeting.

“Is that so? How very unfortunate.” A beat of silence. “Won’t you at least come in, then? It is rather cold outside. I could make you some tea.”

It feels so odd to be talking to the shopkeeper like this. Not only are they so casual, but also *outside the shop*. The Man has never seen the shopkeeper step outside before. For this reason alone, he decides to accept the invitation.

The first thing he notices upon entering the shop is that the long glass case has disappeared from its middle. Incredulous, he stares at the empty space which it used to occupy. Somehow he is almost sure that he knows where it went.

“She bought the forest dream?” The words slip out of his mouth almost against his will. He turns to look at the shopkeeper, who is still standing by the door. “The girl with the hollow eyes. Did you sell it to her?”

“Indeed I have,” the shopkeeper answers, and raises his hand. A shadow passes over the Man’s head. It is the shopkeeper’s bird, for once freed from its cage, gliding to perch on its master’s fingers. “In fact, I had been trying to sell it to her for weeks now.” His eyes shift to lock with the Man’s again. “Do you disapprove of my actions, sir?”

The Man is taken aback by the challenge in his voice. It occurs to him that this is the most . . . alive the shopkeeper has ever looked. The shop has changed. It *is* changing. He finds that thought strangely unsettling.

“I’m sorry,” he says, and the shopkeeper’s sunlit eyes immediately soften. He moves his hand so that the bird can sit on his shoulder, and gestures for the Man to sit in the chair behind his desk.

“Have I ever told you how I started working here?” he asks, pulling an old-fashioned kettle from one of the cabinets. The Man shakes his head.

“I was a medical student at the nearby university. Rather close to getting a degree, in fact. I fell sick, though—it was quite common at the time. Technically, I could still push through the studies, but I lost the drive. I didn’t want to be a burden. This place was a godsend for me. I just—” He sets the kettle at the desk, seemingly searching for words. “I needed to—”

“Get away,” the Man offers. The shopkeeper twitches at the sound of his voice, but then smiles with such genuine delight that it is the Man’s turn to feel startled.

“Yes. Quite so.” He brushes his fingers against the bird’s chest. The bird clicks its beak. “I haven’t thought about it in a long while, but now ... ever since you asked me about dreaming, I’ve been wondering if it isn’t the right time for my reality to regain its edge. What do you think?”

In truth, the Man does not know what he thinks. This whole conversation sits oddly with him—it seems absurd, and yet strangely meaningful, like the most obscure synchronicity he has ever experienced. The shopkeeper is watching him, closely but without his usual keenness, and all of a sudden the Man starts to question if he even expects him to answer. His mind is groping around for words. What it finds is rather unexpected.

“My wife is sick,” he hears himself say. The shopkeeper looks adequately sympathetic.

“I’m sorry. Is it serious?”

The word “yes” doesn’t quite make it through the Man’s throat. “She’s having surgery right now,” he says instead, and the shopkeeper nods a few times.

“Then she’s in good hands. I’m sure she’ll be alright.”

He’s wrong.

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The Man has never considered the many technicalities of death before. The amount of procedures involved surprises him. There are so many papers to sign, so many decisions to make, while he has to remind himself how to breathe. His mind is still frozen in disbelief, numbed, somehow, by the sheer unfeasibility of the sit-

uation. Death is such an abstract concept to him, even now. There is no coming to terms with it—not when he cannot register it as reality.

Somewhere at the edge of his mind, he is aware of how much time he had to try and prepare himself for this moment, but there is only one pattern of behavior he learnt to follow in times of crisis. And so he does the only thing he feels capable of: he runs away. Having slipped out of the hospital, unseen, he returns home. As he climbs the staircase to their (his, now, only his from now on, how strange) apartment, he glances out of the window and towards the paling sky above. There is that reddish-blue hue on the horizon; dawn is hard on his heels, but he still has time, time to reorganize his thoughts and calm his mind. His hands are shaking when he starts fiddling with the keys. It is not that he does not plan to return. He simply doesn't want to think about it. Not now. Not for a while.

The scrape of the key against the lock is soothing in its familiarity—a constant among variables. The Man pauses before the unlocked door. His mind shuffles through the available options. All of a sudden, the simplicity of this choice dawns on him—or rather, he realizes that the choice has been made for him a long time ago. He finds comfort in this thought, and, without fear, pushes the doorknob.

The bell chimes when he opens the door, and then chimes again as it swings closed behind his back. It is very quiet inside the shop. Sunlight streams in through

the front window, ricocheting off glass jars and bottles lined up on display. Just like it always has. Everything here is wood and glass and dust, old but stored with care and undamaged. The wire cage sitting atop of the shopkeeper's desk is empty. His green parka hangs quietly on the coat rack behind the empty chair.

The Man breathes in the silence.

The shop dangles its bait and, for the final time, he follows.





Edyta Gaida  
**Angelology 101**

Michael didn't really have a name. The lowest of the lowest, the last choir did not get individual names. He and his brothers were the malakhim and that's what the angels of higher choirs called them whenever they needed their attention, which happened rarely. But, even though he could never introduce himself—nor would he ever be asked to do so, as his status was obvious to anyone who saw him—he felt just a little better thinking of himself as “Michael”.

Right now he was walking through the Eden Dome, a spectacular city where God and his angels lived. His goal was one of many obsidian spires gleaming in the monochrome light of the Dome's pewter sky. The spires were buildings of utility where angels could present their wishes and ideas, apply for additional privileges, or complain. Michael's supervisor had his post in one of the lowest, least prestigious spires.

He climbed a flight of uncomfortably tall steps and entered the spire. There was only one floor, in the middle of which an angel was sitting at a black desk and staring at a computer screen. Apart from this, the spire's cavernous inside was empty and quiet, its silence pressing on Michael's ears and daring him to break it.

He cleared his throat and the sound echoed back at him, unnaturally loud and gong-like. The angel at the desk looked up.

“Yes, malakh? What brings you here?”

Michael made for the desk, trying to ignore the loud monumental sounds of his steps.

“I wanted to inquire about my application...” he said, clasping his hands tightly together.

“Yes,” said the angel clerk. “What have you applied for?”

“Well, I am the guardian angel of the great auk. But since the species became extinct over a century ago, I have found myself idle. I would like to be assigned new duties.”

The clerk looked at the screen again and pressed a few keys.

“I see. You handed in the application a hundred and sixty years ago, is that correct?”

“Yes.”

“And you’ve been inquiring about it once in every twenty years?”

“That is correct.”

“Well, I am sorry to inform you that we are still examining your application. It is now being considered by the court of Authorities and there are still five tiers of angelic hierarchy it needs to pass through before we can give you an answer. In the meantime I suggest that you remain in the Eden Dome as any visit to Earth must be justified by the necessity of performing your duties. Have a good day.”

Michael left the spire without a word. An emotion uncoiled in his chest and he spent a few minutes trying

to identify it and give it a fitting name. He soon decided that “resentment” was the term that best described it.

Ever since he found himself with no duties to perform, he started changing. At first, he discovered he could be bored. Out of boredom, he invented a name for himself. Then, the feelings came. He still wasn’t very good at identifying them but his repertoire of emotions was slowly yet steadily growing. Angels did not sleep, and the malakhim and other angels of the lowest, third sphere were subject to the earthly passage of time. Every day, Michael acutely felt each passive minute of his boring life. For over four decades, an emotion which he managed to label as “frustration” has surged continuously through the optical fibre of his veins.

Now he had another eventless twenty years to survive. Something inside him felt constricted, like a spring wound too tightly. For the first time in his existence he felt he had to do something, then and there, or else this thing would snap and leave him broken and paralysed. He looked toward the centre of the Eden Dome, a tall mountain whose summit disappeared in silvery mist. He had never been there, in the centre of centres, the sanctum sanctorum, God’s abode. Theoretically, he could go. Practically, there were unwritten laws, more stringent and binding than the official rules, which prohibited all the angels of the third and second sphere from ever approaching the mountain. He made one tentative step, unblinkingly watching the mountain. If God knew everything, he was aware of Michael’s burning intent.

He could strike Michael down whenever he wanted to, and thus prevent him from reaching his temple. Michael waited for just a heartbeat. Nothing happened.

He set out for God's palace, knowing that the journey would take days—but days he had. The new goal did something to him. He felt a flush of something new which turned out to be “excitement”. He liked this new emotion.

First, he had to cross the outer areas of the Dome where the immensely tall obsidian spires grew out of the dull grey marble of the ground. He walked on in silence, unbroken even by his steps. The cold light of the Dome stayed always the same. He met no one. Once, out of curiosity, he entered one of the spires further along, reserved for the use of the Principalities. There was a desk in the middle of the vast chamber but it stood empty and unoccupied. Michael wondered: it had never seemed strange that he met no other angels in his own district because the malakhim were God's angels on Earth, they hardly ever came into the Dome. But the Principalities, apart from guiding whole nations on Earth, also had an administrative duty over lesser angels. So why was no one home?

Many hours passed. Michael walked now through areas devoted to the second sphere of the angelic order. There were black spires here, too, but occasionally he passed also dazzlingly white low buildings which he supposed must be barracks where the Authorities conferred. Just once during the years of his idleness had

he felt a passing bite of envy at the thought that his existence would have been much more meaningful had he been created an Authority, a warrior angel. Now he thought to himself that their buildings were just as cold and lifeless as everything else he had passed. He didn't dare look in, however, for fear of being chased away.

After days of wandering, he finally entered the central district of the Dome, where the Thrones, the Cherubim, and the Seraphim performed their duties. The eerie silence of the Dome was finally broken. On his way towards the mountain, which was now so much closer and seemed even steeper than before, he passed a few deep amphitheatres resounding with overpowering brass sounds of the Seraphim praising God. Michael had never heard such sounds on Earth and was simultaneously awed and repelled. He quickened his steps so as not to hear the song any longer than it was necessary.

Finally, he stood at the feet of the mountain. Only now could he see that it was just another spire, its walls almost completely vertical. He would have to fly to reach the top.

Michael stretched out his silvery wings and began to ascend. Even though angels were not supposed to ever be tired, he soon felt the increasing weight of fatigue pulling him down. But he was determined and kept moving his wings even when he started to feel pain—for the first time in his existence. When he finally reached the mist surrounding the upper parts of the mountain, pain turned into agony. He kept tell-

ing himself: "One more, Michael, just one more, just one more..." and that helped a little. Until his head hit something. For a while he couldn't understand what had happened, and kept pounding his wings up and down, but his head kept hitting the barrier. Then he understood. Either there was nothing up there, or God hated company so much that he had put up and uncrossable boundary between himself and his angels. Either way, Michael was defeated. With a sigh of relief, he let himself fall.

After a long way down, he hit the ground and just lay there flat on his back, relishing the sudden absence of pain. After hours of gazing into the mists overhead, he decided to stand up. He would find an angel of the first sphere and seek answers.

He checked a few spires but no one was there. He thought about descending into one of the amphitheatres but decided against it. Finally, he reached one of the white barracks and opened the door a crack.

"...and we will have to do what they call the back-space. Again."

Michael froze. He recognized the harsh tones of an Authority speaking. He stood motionless, waiting for the speaker to say something more.

"But it hadn't worked before," answered a voice, which Michael thought with a tremor must belong to a Cherubim. "Why would it work now?"

"We have to hope for a mistake."

The Cherubim laughed. It was a ringing, unpleasant sound.

“The other side does not make mistakes. You should know that better than anyone, having fought against them.”

Michael’s folded wings trembled with excitement. “The other side” meant the realm of demons, every angel knew that.

“There have been no mistakes and we have performed the backspace over thirty thousand times already,” continued the Cherubim.

“Very well,” answered the Authority, his voice dispassionate, even though Michael expected anger. “What else do you propose?”

For a short while, there was silence. Then the Authority said:

“Backspace it must be, then. Round the others for the ritual.”

Michael quickly stepped away and flew up. Intuitively he felt he shouldn’t reveal his presence. Something important had just been decided and he expected the Authority might want to punish an eavesdropper like him.

He flew to the Earthgate. Excitement surged through him once again like an electric current and he wanted to keep feeling like this.

The Earthgate was a circular hole in the ground of the Dome. Michael dropped down through it, delighted with his impunity. He would find out what the angels of the higher choirs planned to do and then...and then...he would do whatever he felt like doing. A

wave of pure joy overcame him as the warm scents and sounds of life on Earth below wafted up to him.

He trained his angel senses on the ground, searching for signs of war. It was easiest to find those of the other side wherever a conflict was happening. Soon, he landed among the ruins of a city in Eastern Europe. He knew he shouldn't enjoy the violent sounds of shouting, cries for help, and fired shots, but the battlefield was so full of life and energy after the dead and empty streets of the Dome that he couldn't help smiling.

"Having fun?" asked a mischievous voice right at his ear.

Michael spun around and grinned at the sight of a demon.

"That was fast. I didn't expect any of you would just turn up like that."

"Oh, well," said the demon. "It gets boring after a while with no one to talk to. I'd rather be at the Satanica concert but my post is here. Have to oversee things. Why are you friendly?"

Michael was taken aback at the sudden turn of the conversation.

"I... well... why are you?"

The devil took out a packet of cigarettes and held it out to him. When Michael took one out and kept staring at it suspiciously, the demon sighed, put it in his own mouth, lit it and gave it back to Michael.

"Don't worry, we immortals don't get cancer. I'm friendly because you're not attacking me with one of



those fiery swords you lot carry. So I'm guessing you're not a soldier. And yet you came here, right into our territory. It looks like you need our help and I'm happy to oblige. Never seen an angel up close."

"I'm Michael."

"Didn't know you had names, either. Caradoc."

Michael drew on the cigarette. It was pleasant and disgusting at the same time. He inhaled again.

"Do you know what a backspace is?" he asked.

Caradoc laughed and shook his head with amusement.

"How come a small little angel like you knows about it? Last time I checked, your higher ups were as secretive and stuck up as the Vatican bankers."

"I overheard some of them talking."

Caradoc drew on his cigarette and let out a silvery puff of smoke, which assumed the shape of a snake eating its own tail.

"That's what your backspace is. Or rather what it does."

Michael stared at the snake until it dissolved into nothingness. A bomb went off somewhere nearby. There were more shouts.

"Ouroboros," said Caradoc. "Means time goes in a cycle. Things happen and then they happen again, exactly as before. Only those outside time can notice it, so no wonder you never knew."

"And we are doing that?"

"Your higher angels, yes. They call it backspace because it's like moving a space back—two thousand

years, actually. You see, very soon they will have lost even the little control over people they still have left. They can't stand it, so they get everything back in time to the moment their rule began. They hope something will go differently but they are deluding themselves. They must give up eventually but I can see this time has not come yet."

Michael took one last puff from his cigarette and threw it on the ground. Caradoc offered him another one. He looked sympathetic.

"So... I'll forget everything you told me? The world will move two thousand years back and no one will know that it's all happened before?"

"I'm sorry, mate. But I'll tell you something: I remember all the previous cycles and I'm meeting you for the first time. You changed something. Maybe it's not much, but who knows?"

"But... do you want things to change? They said that it's because of you that every time they do the backspace everything stays exactly the same."

Caradoc laughed again.

"Not exactly the same. Only the outcome is identical. Your pals would like Earth to be like heaven and I heard it's like a tomb in there. Nothing changes. Good knows no conflict. Only evil can create conflict and change, and that's precisely what we do. We keep this world alive. Yet people are so ungrateful. It's a pity they don't get to see your heaven after they die, that would open their eyes!"

Michael sighed.

“I’d rather be one of you.”

Caradoc patted him on the back.

“Sorry, mate, we get only one choice. But maybe I can do something for you. What do you do normally?”

“I’m the guardian angel of the great auk. The whole species went extinct.”

“Sorry to hear that. Do you want me to help it survive? I guess it could be possible.”

Michael thought for a moment and then shook his head.

“If anything, you could make it go extinct sooner. Maybe then I would have more time to become who I am now. Maybe I could get more freedom. Live a little longer outside the tomb.”

Caradoc laughed.

“Go and fly, little angel. You still have a few hours. If this magnificent, conflicted world of life and change bores you, come back for a chat.”

Michael nodded and took off. The smells of smoke, blood, and, as he flew a little further, cooking and pine trees filled him with calm joy. He went to see the Sahara desert and the Great Wall of China. The world stretched and purred below him like an animal.



Marcin Maślanka

## **How the Crows' Shift Put an End to the Anthropocene**

Malvine van der Li was checking herself in the wall-sized, hexagonal mirror which boasted a quaint, wooden, apparently manually carved frame. Its sculptor must have known his trade—minute, scantily clad, winged cherubs crowded the blackened, as if charred frame, embracing correspondingly décolleté mermaids. The scene was so well-captured that a voyeur, if there were one in that hotel room, might swear that the entire carved cohort must have been dancing vigorously with one another but five seconds earlier, before Malvine, who had just got dressed, turned her sight to the mirror. The moment she did so, though, the wooden charm of the cherubs and mermaids seemed somewhat paler, and the to and fro dance of theirs went static. A Dutch-born Japanese's descendant, Malvine was; although those days the place of the ancestors' birth gave as tenuous a clue about the descent of an individual as did the sound of their surname. Long before mankind sent its bravest offshoot to take over Mars, the complexion of the human skin, through the centuries-long, relentless interracial intercourse, had almost universally homogenised itself to that of milky coffee; similar mingling had been at work with people's names. Miss Van der Li was somewhere in her thirties—how-

ever, again, those days, the nano-cosmetics, the air, the beneficial lightness of the Martian gravity, and the food had already rendered the appearance of a thirty-year-old *Unearthling* indistinguishable from the fresh features of a teenage tearaway.

Malvine had just sprayed her special occasions' uniform on herself, and turned to the mirror in order to spot and get rid of the excess fabric dangling here and there. (The here and there, as a voyeur, if there were one, would say, were the curvy elements of her silhouette.) The sprayed textiles immanently brought about a hassle of handling their proper dosage to the body—but the pros had well outweighed the cons of this revolutionary invention. Suffice it to say, the uniform that Malvine had just sprayed herself with was—after the initial five seconds it needed to congeal and engage with its user's skin—bulletproof, blast-proof, immune to moderate radiation, muscle-supportive, self-cooling and self-warming, self-repairing, not to mention such obvious, ubiquitous qualities as colour-changeability or the good, ancient breathability. Little wonder it also sported enough excess power to turn itself into a spacesuit should the wearer face a vacuum. That said, its “magical”, mostly overkill properties did not foreshadow the fact that it still retained the enticing looks and fashionable nuances of what a layman would call a sexy outfit. Especially on Malvine van der Li.

But Ms. Li was by no means in a narcissistic mood. Quite contrarily, her thoughts had entered a belliger-

ent gallop. She was about to respond to an emergency summons issued by the Headquarters the previous day. Having taken a direct charter flight from the Red Planet (she would not perhaps find it comfortable to admit that had it not been for the fact that the expense of the ticket was being covered by the Headquarters, the cost of that hectically undertaken, and collaterally luxurious journey would have exceeded her yearly income), she had intended to acquaint herself—overnight, by means of the *hypnagog*<sup>1</sup>—with the mysterious and potentially perilous case in connection with which she had been summoned. She would perhaps like it even less to admit that it was her but fifth visit to the Earth—what is more, two out of the previous four were compulsory, short<sup>2</sup> school excursions, the third, perhaps most life-changing one, was her solemn military vows at the Headquarters, and the fourth, saddest one—that must have been the *vitrification*<sup>3</sup> of her grand-grandfather. Therefore, Malvine did not dwell on many optimistic

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1 A device predicted and named by an ancient, 20th century word-smith Stanislaw Lem, which allows its user to quickly acquire the desired knowledge while sleeping.

2 The Unearthlings' (Martian) youth were advised not to visit the Earth too often and not to stay there for too long before they have turned twenty. That negative piece of advice stemmed from the observation that the growing teenager's organism is altogether unadapted to the much heavier Earthly gravitational pull.

3 The people that entered the phase once known at death were customarily vitrified, which means that the organs which might carry consciousness were preserved (in ice), in a well-justified hope that by but few decades the mankind will have arrived at the level of full preventability/reversibility of the aging processes.

reminiscences from her forefathers' celestial body. And the affair she was presently about to throw herself in here loomed even darker.

It turned out the hypnagog must have been wrongly programmed. The moment she woke up, instead of the familiar feeling of having been laden with fresh information, Malvine felt as if she had dreamt but nightmares all night long. She could swear she remembered only black, winged creatures—ravens?

As she looked into the mirror, Malvine, maybe for the first time, appreciated the nearly conscious supportiveness of her exoskeleton, the sprayed second skin. The unpleasant, unnatural burden of the local gravity had been lifted from her—fit, though—musculature the moment the uniform congealed. She just chucked away the last unkempt fragment of her official outfit, which the peculiarly framed mirror allowed her to spot, put on her protective glasses, though still ones fashioned in line with the latest trend (in those centuries, the Sun's fierce force had gone truly relentless)—and thus she was ready to go. Slightly absent-minded due to the upcoming briefing and the mission she anticipated to be tasked with, Malvine did not notice that the mirror's curious frame was inhabited not only by mermaids and cherubs. There were also two wooden, ebony black crows, facing each other at the very top of the hexagonal mirror. Had they been there all that time? Or had the winged cherubs turned crows? Presently they looked as a three-dimensional emblem. The other thing



Malvine did not see was an ugly crack in the mirror's lower left corner. The instant the woman left the room, the wooden crows suddenly started opening their beaks and stretching their wings, and the crack started to widen. A voyeur, if there were one, would now hear the ominous croaking that the two gloomy creatures commenced to utter. The crows freed themselves from the frame and, ostensibly, turned into real birds. The frame gave off its last, hair-raising squeak, whilst the crack became a thousand cracks, as the mirror shattered into a billion sharp pieces. The room went dim, occupied by the black crows, into which all the cherubs and mermaids had suddenly turned.

Meanwhile Malvine, fully unaware of the outlandish transformation of what used to be her hotel room, scuttled through the nightly luminescence of the corridor and took the translucent lift that carried her—not downstairs however, but upstairs. While it moved, the lift's magnetic engine chimed a bass note, as if it were to reassure Malvine: "Lieutenant Li, you're now borne by the reliable, Earthly hands—even if these hands are mechanical," and so it droned its sensual purr. That took a while, because the room, in which Malvine was keenly watched by the bizarre ravens, was placed at correspondingly high an altitude to that of the top rocks of Mount Blanc—whilst the tallness of the top floor level, in which the orbital planes' station lay, well exceeded that of Mount Everest, thus the lift had an ascent of over five kilometres. In a manner in which an

ancient child would put a brick to its toy tower, maybe just to succumb to a whim of removing it the next day, the laborious *buildrones*<sup>4</sup>, like a cohort of flying navvies, relentlessly reshaped the gigantic edifice. Up to the top of that enormous, though mainly uninhabited (and constantly restructured) spire meandered a serpent of shafts, channelling the translucent lift cabins as arteries channel blood. Presently one cell of that blood, namely the officially dressed Malvine, emerged from the purring, translucent cabin. She entered the top floor's orbital planes' station—the first and the last stop on her way to the Headquarters. The orbital plane had retained the second element of its name perhaps mostly for the sake of convenience—because in fact it neither functioned nor looked like what had once been known under the name of “a plane”. The vessel was capable of vertical takeoff and touchdown, its speed shied that of satellites—but, fortunately, that immaculately white projectile could also abandon chasing satellites, could give up boasting its mighty powers—because what Malvine needed was but to get a taxi to the Earth's surface; and the orbital plane met her request perfectly. Those days it was quite ubiquitous for a human to linger “on” Earth for months, even for years, housed by enormously elevated, suborbital structures that swarmed around the planet, without touching the latter's authentic ground level. The Headquarters, however, lay on that authen-

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4 Heavyweight drones designed to lift, carry, and mount weighty constructional burdens.

tic ground level (and far beyond it); therefore Malvine was bound to set her foot on the soil. As the plane descended, the clouds thinned, unveiling the long dead wood of the one or two kilometres tall ancient skyscrapers. They had been kept as monuments of cultural heritage, sheltering both museums and idle antiquated robots (since recycling conscious machines which remained able to keep their own maintenance had long been penalised).

A minuscule, yet rapid flood of reflections poured into Malvine's thoughts. She had been born on Mars, to a dozenth or so generation begotten thereon. For Malvine, the digitally driven miracle of terraforming that changed the once barren globe into a thriving, consciously conceived, warless paradise, whose exuberant, fertile vegetation seemed to have outweighed the wonders of its donor planet, seemed as remote an event as the discovery of America could seem to a 21<sup>st</sup> century teenager. Brought up in the mild, stable breeze, at the feet of the lush, fulvous meadows of Olympus Mons, in a sunlit place, where one knew it would rain only on Mondays and Wednesdays, and where one could hand-feed the red lions and the two-trunked elephants, while observing the archaeopteryxes<sup>5</sup> soaring the sky, Malvine very early in her life fell in love with the shrewdly engineered nature, introducing her first impartially designed breed of bird into the Martian biosphere by the time

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5 It turned out that reviving certain species, once extinct on the Earth, would pay off more than installing some of the current breeds; as the former suited the conditions of the terraformed Mars better.

she turned eighteen. Willing to pursue a doctoral degree, she commenced postgraduate studies within the field of Martian Ornithology, simultaneously postponing her potential marriage to her fifties (although scarce fatal accidents still boasted the unpleasant power of spoiling the statistics, the time's average lifespan oscillated daringly around two hundred years, and women's fertility turned switchable due to an already arrived at partial reversibility of the ageing processes). The doctorate's times saw Malvine furtively contacted, and then even more clandestinely employed by the Headquarters as an offshore analyst. Little wonder the military—the quiet sentinels of the two akin, yet so separate humanity-bearing worlds—took a biologist on board: even though the thoroughly primitive ideas of borders and countries had long been gone, a multiplicity of threats remained; varying from individuals' plots to the unknown of the Universe—hence the need for defence. But Malvine was no ordinary biologist—even within the Martian plethora of digitally altered human wit at its best, she was somewhat exceptional. Being an undergraduate student, she proved that certain fragments of birds' genome contain huge, yet annoyingly cleverly concealed chunks of extra-terrestrial information. The disclosure was mercilessly criticised by her supervisors, chalked up to a coincidence, and her paper seemed to have disappeared—but it was then, just a day or so later, that she was contacted by the Headquarters' liaison for the first time.

As to her private life, Malvine had none. Yet she also had it all. Backed by an intimidating intelligence, at her disposal she had enticing prettiness and would acquaint herself with a man every time she needed one. But all the Martians were so. They were all vivid, vibrant, vigorous, voluptuous, carefully conceived<sup>6</sup>, voracious consumers of life, always apt to vanquish—or to be vanquished. That was why the flight on the Earth-Mars (or *vice versa*) route cost so much—the Earth had been still painfully haunted by many of its intrinsic troubles, including overpopulation, genetic mutations and violence, so the godlike Martians would not perhaps meet with a hearty welcome in certain circles—not to mention the perils of a potential clash of the two so unequal populations. Thus the authorities preferred to tacitly retain a partial separation of the two worlds. A permeability between the globes existed; nobody had drawn a line in the sand; nobody officially forbade travelling to and fro—but in fact relatively few did so. The exchange of natural goods between the globes, which was intense, had been long automated and placed under the robotic supervision. Therefore Malvine's present journey, to her own mind, represented something of an event.

In that roundabout way her thoughts wandered back to reality—and to the upcoming briefing at the

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6 Genetic modelling had been a cornerstone of the Martian society. First colonisers, the Forefathers, avowed not to return, and in exchange they were given the freedom of resorting to all the scientific means available—the means which on the Earth remained tabooed long after—to form the new, better Martian human.

Headquarters. Everybody knew that the Headquarters did not invite tourists or school excursions. The Headquarters were commonly deemed the ultimate instance of authority—a layman knew that they would keep an eye upon the course of events—that was all a layman knew, and that was just enough to know.

Malvine van der Li knew way more. The over hundred-stories deep underground bunker, embedded in the solid rocks of North America's crust, had its secret entrance in the low pentagonal block—no wonder the latter had once been known as the Pentagon.

But Malvine paid hardly any heed to the historical nuances. The fact that the hypnagog had not worked, leaving her unprepared for the briefing, only aggravated her even previously anxious mood, unnerving the normally strong-headed ornithologist. The *Unearthlings*, due to the admirable advancement of their world, did not really embrace fear. That moment however, descending into the Headquarters, even though thus guarded by a multitude of intelligent shields, not to mention the sheer depth, Malvine did not feel secure. Fortunately, the transportation did not take long and she was soon facing the heavy, but slightly ajar door of the briefing room.

What she saw sent icy thrills down her spine. The main computer's holographic display screened a series of black and white pictures, looking as if they were old Roentgen X-ray photographs; all of them labelled with the names of various places on the Earth. Each X-ray depicted a female womb. Each womb bore a foetus.

But, to Malvine's profound bewilderment, none of the foetuses was human. The X-rays showed wings, beaks, claws—already visible, already developed, already leading to an impossible, irrational, monstrous conclusion—these women, apparently from all around the globe, were pregnant ... they were gravid with birds!

"We have been receiving these X-ray threats one by one, day by day, region by region, for almost a week now," said the Comgen, that is the Commodore General, in his usual nonchalant manner, emerging noiselessly from the shadowy interior of the room. He was bald and thin, and even though he wore a suit, not a uniform, something about him made it evident that he was a military man all the way through. "Meanwhile," he continued, "we have delicately examined all the women affected. Without letting them know, you know. Turns out, this is all for real. I mean the birds are alive and thriving, the pregnant organisms seem not to have been rejecting that stuff. We have a problem, Ms. Malvine. And we badly need your help."

"Which species..." started Malvine.

"We're not one hundred percent sure, actually, you know, since the creatures must have been heavily genetically modified, but, yes. After all, they are all ravens," carried on the Comgen.

"Ravens..." Malvine had not ever felt the way she presently did. The unexplained failure of the hypnagog, her ornithological background, even probably the charred-black, winged sculptures of the hotel's mirror's

frame—all of a sudden, the ominous puzzle in her mind commenced to disclose itself to her.

“These X-ray messages are being sent from so well concealed a source that it has got our analysts pissed off twenty four hours a day,” the Comgen continued, resorting, as he liked it, now to colloquialisms, now to outlandish grammar. “We’d classified these as terrorist threats at first. It could’ve been a maniac, a sacked genetic engineer, you know, any type of a frustrate, we suspected that kind of minor plot. But hitherto we received this, and this ain’t no minor nuisance. Hence we’ve had you summoned.”

Having said that, the Comgen made a nonchalant gesture towards the holographic display, which made the X-rays give place to a new image. The picture went blurred and distorted, which was a sign that the three-dimensional mode was about to ignite. But what came first was not an image, but a sound. An elevated chime of trumpets, somewhat unfitting the situation. “As if a king of the savages were about to chair an audience of his right here,” thought Malvine. The instance she thought that, the image stabilised.

And indeed, a king appeared. By means of the three-dimensional image a crow materialised. But it was not an ordinary one. Not only did the animal appear much huger than its species’ typical size, and not only was it much more muscular, but it was also dressed. Dressed in such a way that, as inconceivable as it may seem, one was sure that one had encountered the king



of the ravens. The creature sported a very long, scarlet coat. His feet were shod in purple, four-fingered, bizarre moccasins. Apparently, and quite shockingly, apart from the regular wings, he also possessed arms, now partially hidden underneath the feathers and gloved with leather of the same purple hue as the moccasins. Crucially though, the animal's head was crowned by an enormous diadem, a serious royal insignie, luxuriously studded with gems of a provenience closer unknown. Even before it started to speak, there was no slightest doubt that the bird had acquired full self-awareness.

"I am Jacob the King of the Ravens," croaked the coated bird in a manner that somehow brought to mind a mixture of the old buccaneers' tongue mixed with a baby's cooing. "Be it known that the splendid Ravens' Shift has commenced. We the Ravens hereby announce that we wage merciless war upon the so-called Humanity lest the latter make the globe uninhabitable to us, self-aware animals. We will lay siege upon each and every human dwelling that dares to contradict us and our ways. You received our X-rays ultimatum, but be it certain to you that you have seen but a tip of the iceberg. You, the cursed human vermin, shall acknowledge that we have clandestinely conceived no less than one million genetically modified baby ravens within no fewer than one million horrid women's wombs. We insist you bear in mind that should the medics of yours try resorting to abortion, the baby ravens are pre-programmed so that facing an existential threat they will explode. You are

lucid enough to fathom that that translates into disintegrating the baby raven's miserable bearer."

"You have just probably started asking yourself," continued Jacob the King of the Ravens after a short pause, during which he vanished, giving way to the already known images of the X-rayed wombs, but this time the number of the quickly scrolling images soared up to hundreds of thousands of baby ravens borne by the uterus, "how on Earth have we become self-aware, how we altered our biology so that we have become viviparous rather than oviparous, and how the heck have we conceived—though one shall not call the process insemination, it was actually closer to immaculate conception," laughed the raven, "—a million of such sweet baby ravens within your wombs? Well, let me tell you—it is all thanks to the very you. You don't believe me? Think. Two centuries ago your medicine had gone molecular. No longer does the polite doctor prescribe a medicine that would penetrate all the patient's viscera, harming the latter, even though the source of inflammation is but a tiny dot. Now, very cleverly, you dispatch armies of infinitesimal robots—the *nanobots*—to battle the malaise in its heartland, which is on the subatomic level. Very cleverly, indeed. Consequently, you have lulled yourself into complacency. But now, let me elucidate that to you—this utopian coin has its very ugly side, too. You have produced an enormous influx of the constantly tweaked and bettered, biologically active cohorts of nanobots! You have

produced a relentless wave of the subatomic level's electronic slurry. A very dangerous slurry. A slurry that we—the animals—have inadvertently bathed ourselves in for centuries now. Did you think that it would remain neutral to our bodies? Did you think about those consequences at all? I doubt so. To cut a long story short, let me put that bluntly—an average raven was already self-aware dating back from about a century. The slurry of yours that we had taken in—through the air and the water, through the rubbish and leftovers we ravened upon—filled our brains and our guts, to mingle with our natural, intrinsic intelligence—and one of the outcomes of that mingling is the very creature that has just addressed you. Namely—it is me.”

And so Jacob the King of the Ravens continued for a long time, while two more people entered the room. These were Professor Smith, a renowned ornithologist and Malvine's former supervisor, and a uniformed man whom Malvine knew not.

“There is no way of removing the ravens' foetuses. We have examined some of them very thoroughly. They are basically grown-up, self-aware, lucid individuals, literally laden with very cleverly altered nanobots, who must have once been pre-programmed for self-development and, assuming the most minute shape, smuggled into the women by means so far unknown,” said professor Smith.

“We are considering an evacuation... Evacuating all the most valuable people to Mars. We have been, to put

it frankly, taken aback by the assault. What we hope is that the ravens will not cope with the multitudes that we would ... uhm ... leave here," muttered the military man.

"So what is my role?" interrupted Malvine, already irked by the inhumane stance of the latter speaker.

"Take it easy, Ms. Li," answered the Comgen. "You will play a very special role..."

Hearing these words, Malvine felt an unexpected, cold prick of an injection in the neck. She started, startled, yet her struggle was all in vain, and the scream of helplessness she uttered at the last moment was to no avail. Her body drooped, and the grotesqueness of that collapse was amplified by the deteriorating shape of her exoskeleton outfit which imploded a bit, as if it were filled with air, and now punctured. The Comgen raised his arms, so that a voyeur, if there were one, could presently see that he had a pair of black wings underneath. "Be extremely diligent and careful with the surgery," said he, or rather croaked. "Embed into her the shrewdest, smallest, freshest baby raven that our military *ravenologists* have come up with. Malvine van der Li will be our deadliest missile. Truly, the final blow of the Crows' Shift."

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Malvine van der Li sat calmly in a Mars-bound projectile. The modern vessel had unfolded her main solar sail, and, as she joyfully speeded through the vacuum, was already more than half the way between the globes. Malvine thought about the utmost importance of the mission

she had been burdened with. She felt she was the genuine and ultimate trustee of humanity. She was about to bring about an irreversible change to the Red Planet.

Or rather—the change.

The Shift.

Malvine looked at her reflection in the preceding seat's screen. Silently beamish, she looked more voluptuous than ever. Her exoskeleton uniform sported the tiniest curve at the belly. The two pulses beat. She sensed their reassuring rhythm.

The baby raven dreamt.



Renata Strzok

## **The Voyage**

Emily had her sandy blonde hair done in two plaits, and nothing could unnerve Ronald more than this sight. They were sitting opposite each other. She with her laptop open, upright and very official; he, at the other end of the table, relaxed but attentive.

Emily always evoked ambiguous feelings in him. On the one hand, she was helpful, intelligent, and very ambitious, but on the other hand, her schoolgirl studiousness and the plaits, coupled with the fact that she was his manager, made him feel uneasy. A manager shouldn't look like a daughter you don't have, he thought.

"But can you tell me a bit more about why you decided to resign, Ron?" she inquired in a concerned voice, making it clear she was speaking on behalf of the company, and that the company needed him, a brilliant engineer with twenty nine years of experience. "What's that about the Spanish poet?"

He smiled at her, eager to explain.

"I came across his epic poem a year ago during the Christmas break. It was real winter then, not like the one we're having now. It was snowing all day, and my car's battery ran down so we couldn't go visit my sister and her family in the country as we had planned. Instead we stayed at home, and I got round to unpacking a box of books that a friend left at my house before

he went abroad. Didn't have the time to even touch it earlier, you know how it is."

Emily nodded, already slightly impatient.

"I took up this one book to see if I could still read Spanish—it had been years since I learned the language. Didn't expect much, I must say. I thought I'd put it away quickly, tired of having to either guess the meanings of particular words from the context, or to use a dictionary. But the days were long enough, the nights even longer, and I immersed myself in the story. It is told by a mariner—I tend to use this obsolete word when I speak about him, I'm using it in my translation too—Reinaldo, who sets off from Spain to the New World and during the first *calma*, without much to do, he starts writing a personal diary. They say a calm sea does not make a skilled sailor. Well, I say that an occasional calm may make him a poet ... but I see you're growing impatient, Emily."

Emily first exhaled with visible relief, then smiled and said she wasn't.

"I understand your enthusiasm, and actually admire it. I'm wondering, though, if your undertaking will profit you in any way."

At that, he felt much older, yet at the same time much younger with regard to Emily. He sat there for a long thoughtful while, searching for an answer that would make it clear to her what the profit from translating a sixteenth-century Spanish poem could be. A good answer somehow didn't want to present itself.



How was he to explain to her, a person so insistent on professional and financial success, that there would be no profit she would consider valid? The financial reward from the undertaking would likely be none—after all, who would publish a book about sixteenth-century navigation techniques and the voyagers' racist perceptions of the indigenous people in far-off lands? There'd be no prestige associated with it, either. No recognizability, no promotion, no serious people inviting him to dinner. How was he to explain to her that the profit would reside elsewhere?

"I like to tell stories, Emily."

He looked into her green eyes, which now betrayed some inquisitiveness. An inquisitive person would make good company for me, he thought and instantly recalled a passage from the poem where Reinaldo described Antonio, a fellow sailor who became his dear friend. The many nights they whiled away together story-telling, and the interest Antonio showed, were much cherished by the narrator. Ronald recalled those passages often, and an anxiety over his translation's syntax was mixed with longing. Now, he felt he could tell Emily a lot of stories if she wasn't his manager, and if her interest wasn't so short-lived.

"But translating a book is quite different from telling a story, isn't it?" she asked, skipping nervously from one tab on her desktop to another. "The story in that book isn't yours, and won't be even after you put it in English."

She swept her plaits back with one hand and with the other continued to play with the Alt and Tab keys. If she were his daughter, he would surely tell her a lot of stories. If she were his daughter, he would patiently explain to her that stories are rarely owned by just one person. That you can come across someone's story and feel with all your heart that it's always been yours, too—that some stories, in fact, belong to all of us.

He smiled at her with difficulty. She could take it as the kind of smile that ends burdensome conversations, a smile that says "Let's not make this any harder for each other, shall we?"

In reality, he was recalling the nights he spent reading the part about a storm season. As the ship got lost at sea, Reinaldo felt troubled, his mood sunk low and he was questioning whether he'd ever see home again. The story acquired a different, slower pace, and Ronald spent hours searching for synonyms of the word *dark*. During those nights, he was quietly reliving the years that followed little Emma's death. Emma's hair never grew long enough to do them in plaits, and Ronald didn't have the time to tell her enough stories that would help her understand more about the world.

"Anyway, it's been a pleasure to work with you..." Emily was saying when his thoughts finally came back to the surface. Those nights were long and difficult, yes, but it was not a time to dwell on that. After all, both he and Reinaldo finally reached the shore, and he was ready to continue translating.

He understood that there was no more time to explain the point of his undertaking to Emily. "I'll send you the translation when it's finished," he was planning to say at the end of that conversation, but she was clearly in a hurry. She'd closed her laptop and was standing in front of him, holding the thing with one arm and stretching the other arm towards him so they could shake hands.

"Thank you, Ron," she said.

"Thank you," he said as she was leaving.



Jakub Biernacki

## **Rusty**

The rumble of the engines shook the glass in the windows, and people in the courtyard started to look for shelter inside the building before the dust raised by the rockets hit the station. Again.

Old Thomas had seen it many times before. In fact, being an accountant, he was better at operating on bigger numbers. He could easily tell how many times he heard the rockets starting from Trustdale's docks while, on the other hand, the oneness of days spent in the station made it quite difficult for him to estimate his own age. He wore bottle-bottom glasses on his orange, thick-skinned face and found himself humming long-forgotten songs he used to sing decades ago.

Old Thomas was 4800 blast-offs old now and it started to feel like a burden.

'Perhaps it's the season,' he said with his fingers on the window. The tsunami of sand was already there, playing noisy staccato on the glass. Perhaps it was the season, many people found the windy months difficult to stand and extremely melancholic. Old Thomas sighed, although he hated sighing. All of the 'daddy sounds', as he called them, were against his nature which ultimately led him to this god-forsaken planet. Dust, the symbolic difference between the life of glass-glittering skyscrapers and wine with ready late dinners, and the

life he chose, had already become less of an adventure and more like tiring, suffocating orange reality.

Mathilde observed as he reached for his pipe, filling the office with cheap tobacco smell and silence. The two things so characteristic of him.

She backed off and followed a tiny corridor to the kitchen.

'It's tough for everyone,' she said with a pinch of sympathy. The day was about to become very busy. The windy months are on the doorstep and it may mean a lot of things, but only one is certain: a lot more mouths to stuff. The last people who wanted to winter in the station were expected to knock on their gates this afternoon. Unless, of course, the duststorm didn't keep them too busy.

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'Look, Ma, this look like a hoove'copte!'" said Go pointing at a potato peel that presented its hoovercopter nature by landing smoothly on the kitchen floor.

'He surely talks a lot. Almost as much as he spits, poor Gap-Tooth,' thought Mathilde and sighed quietly. 'No one else came to help me, Go,' she said. 'Where are the others? Are they still out?'

'No idea, Ma.'

She sighed again and cut angrily into a dust potato.

'I should stop sighing that much,' she scolded herself. 'Back in the days it wasn't me who was sighing, oh no. Men used to sigh when they saw me, not I.'

'Why, Ma?'

‘Oh. Sorry, little one, I was talking to myself. Things are not so well.’

‘No?’

She swallowed a sigh and left the potato on the table. An orange smudge marked her face when she wiped her eyes. She didn’t cry, it was just perspiration, nothing more. Why did she care so much? Why was it so important? Probably she also got old, probably she just wanted things to be as they were before, probably she felt responsible for caring for everyone in this building since other people seemed too tough to be able to.

Or she was just stupid.

‘Mr Crow has a difficult time in his life, Go,’ she said.

‘Now?’ the boy asked. ‘Dust and win’ and all them trains to unloa’, it ain’t changin’, Ma. Why’s he troublin’ hisself ri’ now?’

‘Go, everybody has this time in their lives when they think there’s more behind than there is in front of them. They think a lot about what happened and even more about what didn’t, so they have to spend a lot of time at a window when it rains or in front of a fireplace. There’s nothing wrong with them, it just happens.’

‘Ho’ much time have Mr Cro’ now in front o’ hisself?’

‘It’s not for me to say, I don’t know.’

‘Do Mr Cro’ know?’

‘Probably not.’

‘Then who know?’

Mathilde murmured something to herself with some cussing and asking about the place where Go's parents were.

'Do you like peeling those potatoes, little one? Do you want to have a car more to peel?'

'I know, I'm shuttin' my mouth hole.'

'Good.'

The silence was full of her nails scratching the lino of a worktop and the whistling of air coming in and out of the gap between Go's teeth.

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Go finished the last lousy sand potato and then ran away from the kitchen and its threat of a potato car. He had to find the others and tell them the news. Old Thomas was sick and probably dying, Old Thomas who was always there, who counted trains, led the meetings of the adults and last year administered baptism to Serene's young sister.

Everyone from the gang looked up to him, no doubt.

Bark and Serene were on the yard shoving away small hills of dust. Go gave them their secret signal with a whistle and two fingers raised to his cap's peak. The same went with Lu, who was repairing her sand-bike and Hen, playing with his shotgun made of scrap.

The winds came back so the whole gang was there.

They ran through the corridors of the station and all the other people had to give way to them, just like orange llamas have to mind the dust shepherds.

'What the hell?!' shouted one of the Slagdivers



women when Bark nudged her out of her way. 'It's no place for children,' she muttered but nobody listened anymore. The children didn't seem to mind living in the old building adorning the waste's landscape with its brickwalls and cargo cranes ginger with rust. Their faces were already orange just like the whole surface of the planet, their hearts wild like the winds, their hair dry like railway sleepers. Whatever the woman thought, the children were part of this world and trying to change it would be more difficult than trying to bend a rail.

The gang reached the top of the stairs and ran out of the building. The roof of the big storehouse was a good place to discuss the matter.

'So, Go, you say that Old Thomas is going to die? How sure are you?'

'I ain't no su', Ma told me wha' I'm telli' you. Mo' or le?'

'We need more intel,' said Hen, who really liked watching those old spy movies on the old TV-set he brought with himself every time his parents left the station to take care of the llamas. Everything is better than watching llamas chewing the scrub.

'It not gonna be difficult, boys.'

Lu got up, stretching her muscular body. She had to work with scrap all day long, and nothing keeps one in better shape than juggling with broken refrigerator compressors.

'I'm going with you,' decided Bark in a strong voice. She looked at him, at his baggy clothes hiding a skeleton-like boyish person.

‘No way.’

‘Yes way.’

‘No!’

‘I am Bark of the Koolins from the station, my family rules this place and people call me the Magnificent Prince and they do it with fear and submission!’

‘Nobody ca’ you tha’!’

‘They do! With fear and submission!’

‘You really need a collar made of human skulls, alright.’

‘Lu, let’s go already! And tell me where we’re going exactly.’

‘Look,’ she sighed. ‘Old Thomas lives in his office, that’s the window under the towerclock, the one from the courtyard’s side, you must know that. He spends there all afternoons and now he probably stays there all the time. You know, not to get more deadly sick. We can climb the pipes and eavesdrop at the window. Easy like Sunday morning.’

‘Uh, right. Right,’ he gurgled with little enthusiasm.

‘Does anyone really call him that?’ asked Serene, lifting an eyebrow when Lu and Bark had left the group.

‘Yeah, I do,’ said Go. ‘specially whe’ I want so’ of them imported candies I do.’

‘Hm,’ Serene grunted. She folded her arms and looked at Bark trying to get up a drainpipe and follow Lu. She grumbled a little more, scowled and added: ‘Do they have coconut ones?’

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Mathilde put her boot on the first step but she stopped when she heard the pitter-patter of at least five pairs of feet. The rumble took a turn and disappeared somewhere in the building. She shrugged and took another step. Then she heard someone calling her.

‘Ma’am! Ma’am! Can you stop for a while? Won’t be a minute!’

The man who came towards her looked as if something terrible had just happened to him. It was difficult to judge if his jacket was more unravelled or stained with oil. The same dark stains covered his face and stuck his hair together. Apart from the part where he had no hair on his brass-like shiny skull.

‘There’s not much life left in him, ma’am,’ he said, gasping and leaning against the wall.

‘What?’ she asked, petrified. ‘Who are you, again?’

‘The train, I’m sorry, I think I’m a bit chaotic, the train is sick, there’s not much in him, I’m sure.’

She looked at him for a moment.

‘The morning train? Did you come here with the train? Are you from the crew?’

‘Yes, yes, yes, I am, but I ain’t engineer, them smart-asses know nothing about him. And I tell you, he’s sick.’

‘You’re not an engineer? So who are you exactly?’

‘I’m a boy,’ replied the man. ‘I unload the cargo, protect it, take care of the train.’

‘OK, Mr...?’

‘Derry. Tack Derry, ma’am.’

‘Mr Derry, I’m...’

‘Mathilde! Mathilde!’ a loud, pigeon-like voice interrupted her, echoing in the narrow corridor. ‘Mathilde!’

‘What in the name of a thousand sand demons?!’

The Slagdivers woman ran towards her, her arms waving over her head. She didn’t even notice the train man, such was her need to express her outrage. ‘These children shouldn’t be here, Mathilde!’ she grabbed the cook’s arm and squeezed it painfully. ‘They ought to have a good, Christian education somewhere in the civilization, instead of running around in rugs, screaming like hairy demons and making it very difficult for normal people to work, that’s all I’m saying.’

Mathilde tried to stay calm. Mr Derry gave her a sympathetic look.

‘Alright, Heather, be a good Christian and fetch us two cups of tea. Yes, yes, I’ll do something about the kids, I think they are just worried about Tom, at least they are. Now tea, breakneck!’ she ordered Heather Slagdiver as if she had been doing that all her life. Then she turned to the man. ‘So, Mr Derry, let’s sit for a second and please tell me how you know the train isn’t well.’

Derry looked hesitantly at Mrs Slagdiver but her face expressed nothing but surprise. He was alright in the situation. ‘It’s the sound, ma’am. It ain’t healthy. When it runs, the wind should sing like a mermaid, but it ain’t singing, it howls like a banshee.’

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‘Oh, scrap!’ cursed Bark when he found out that a couple of inches wide cornice and a rusty pipe were all that was keeping him from falling two floors down to the courtyard’s cobbles. The cobbles looked as if they were bathed in blood because someone had tried to get rid of the orange sand with a hose. But it didn’t look like wet sand. It looked like blood. Bark took another look down. Yep, definitely blood.

The only thing worse than moving along the cornice and the pipe over an abyss was climbing the pipe up over the same abyss. Fortunately, it wasn’t extremely vertical and a bit of imagination could transform the struggle into a nice Sunday walk on a slightly lopsided pavement. Especially if one shut one’s eyes and hugged the non-plastered wall.

‘Come on!’ he heard Lu calling him from above. She climbed the wall as if it were a ladder. One with broad rungs and banisters. And with velvet padding.

‘Alright, she’s a girl from the desert, I’m a boy from the station. I’m at least as good as she is. Pull yourself together!’ he debated in his mind and loudly said ‘I’m coo...’

In the end, the pipe was nothing like a ladder. It was more rusty than it seemed, hiding its rustiness under a layer of dust. And it was Bark who got into this booby trap. His leg broke through the pipe’s uncertain construction, leaving it hanging on one slacken hook.

For a moment he was balancing with one leg on the broken pipe and one arm grasping Lu's wrist. There was one lost llama on the courtyard looking at him indifferently while his heart was trying to jump out of his rib cage. He regretted having gone up there with Lu, envied the llama that it had ground under its feet, and wished that the whole thing was over. But first of all, he wanted to find the cornice with his right foot.

'Scrap, I'm gonna...' came from his lungs.

'Shut up! Just make a big step and get here!'

'I... I... can't. I don't want to get smashed against the courtyard.'

'Get up here, or else I swear to dust I'm gonna tell everyone how clumsy you are, mister Prince.'

'You lousy slag...' Bark breathed in to release his anger and fear in one long chain of epithets but his eyes found his own reflection in the window. 'Wait, we made it!'

But Lu was already gazing inside the office with her nose flattened on the glass.

'Be quiet, someone's coming!' she shushed him.

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'Tom? Are you here?'

Mathilde came to the office with hot tea and a pile of papers. One of the windows knocked a desk lamp over when it was opened. The air was full of dust particles shining in what was left of the sunlight. Mathilde put a scarf round her face and came to the desk.

Old Thomas was sitting in his armchair and looking outside of the window. His suit had an orange gloss.

‘You look rusty.’

‘I feel rusty.’

‘It was a joke.’

‘I know.’

Mathilde put down the tea. She had problems with looking Tom in his eyes so she walked across the room. It was all built in wood-like plastic with warm brown bookshelves and brass finishing. An old photo was captioned in Polish: *Ja z mamą i siostrą.*

‘People are worried, Tom.’

‘Because?’

‘The usual. Duststorms are supposed to be the worst in history, again. The Waters argue with the Slagdivers because they want their place next to the big storehouse to set up their tents. The morning train was late and had some nasty scratches on one side so people say the jackals are back.’ Old Thomas didn’t move a bit. ‘And I have a tonne of paperwork for you.’

‘Give it to Hebe, she can count everything up way better than me anyway.’

‘You know that you have to authorize everything she does. The AI is not enough for those bureaucratic bastards up there.’

The evening train’s hooter wailed in the distance. The sound spilled on the wasteland and glanced off the office windows.

‘As if there was any difference,’ the man mur-

mured. 'I can easily imagine being deleted. I feel like I'm still here but the key has already been pressed. I'm being transferred to bin and my only hope is that the system will bluescreen without me.'

'Nice poetry,' Mathilde said, trying not to tap with her fingers. 'Well,' she thought. 'Maybe tapping with my toes would be enough to stand this pathetic monologue? He shouldn't notice, right? Or perhaps I can tap in my mind? Yeah, like this. This tune, for example.'

Tap tap tap. Tap.

'Mathilde. Do you know I was on Ceres for three years?'

'What? The mining station? What for?'

'And Siberia. On Earth. I stayed there half a year.'

'Doing what?'

'Things. I was young. I'm thinking about writing this down, you know? So the little experience I had is not wasted. I can still say something meaningful, perhaps the future people of this place may need guidance.'

'Do as you wish but please, see to the papers. The present people need you, too.'

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'So, Old Thomas don't want to work and make Hebe do everything,' reported Lu.

'Hebe can't 'cause it's not a person,' Bark added. 'But it's not important. Tom looks like he's going to die tomorrow!'

'Shut up, he ain't,' Lu stopped him. 'Ma has to do everything for Old Thomas and she looks sick and tired.'



‘You shut up. He looks like he’s just seen a ghost. His own ghost,’ Bark added in a grim voice.

‘He don’t eat, we’ve seen him not eating!’

‘Lu’s right, he looks skinny and has a beard now. He never used to!’

This news caused a great stir among the gang members.

‘What do we do?’

‘Easy. We ‘ave to tell him that it’s not that bad.’

‘To be dead?’ Hen seemed to be surprised. ‘And it’s not?’

‘My nanna used to say that she wanted to be finally in peace,’ said Serene.

‘It’s because your parents are awful and drink a lot!’ replied Bark.

‘No, they’re not.’

‘Yes, they are. I heard them saying that my family is a flock of privileged bastards. They are horrible!’

‘Well, and you are stupid...’ Serene flamed up but a coconut-flavoured thought made her add: ‘...your Magnificent Princeness.’

‘Well, still, peace.’

‘We could write hi’ a lette!’

‘A letter, huh? Ink on paper? Anybody here can write?’ asked Lu, who was born and raised on a scrapheap.

‘Yes,’ replied Hen.

‘Yep,’ said Bark.

‘I can,’ replied Serene.

‘A little,’ said Go.

‘I have some paper,’ Serene added. ‘I wanted to write my story on this one but I can spare it.’

‘Let’s do it! We can slip it under his door, I’ve seen it in one movie!’

‘Wait!’ said Hen, raising his hands. He was sitting in silence while the others discussed the letter. He was thinking. Sometimes, he thought, he was quite good at it. The whole gang turned their open mouths towards him. ‘We can’t just tell him *it’s not that bad, man, no worries.*’

‘Why not?’

‘It’s not scientific. You see, we have to find out if it really isn’t that bad. By experimenting. With objective conditions and observable results.’

‘You sure read stuff, Mr Henry.’

‘And where do we get them observables from?’

‘I have a pretty neat plan,’ Hen smiled.

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‘A Mr Derry came to me.’ Mathilde brought breakfast to the office, llama sausage, eggs and imported coffee, and tried to get some conversation out of Old Thomas. She had not much patience left in her. ‘Do you know him?’

‘Derry? The Brass Head? Did he tell you about the mermaids and the banshees?’

‘Yes,’ she said, surprised. ‘Does it happen often?’

‘Regularly,’ Old Thomas smiled.

‘We should help him. People can’t go around here and scare others with their mumbo-jumbo fairy-tales!’

‘On the contrary, Mr Derry is always right. We should inform the railway inspectors.’

‘But ... But this man has a brass plate instead of a forehead!’

‘I know. Anything else happened?’

Mathilde looked at him, blinked and decided to stop caring.

‘There was something wrong with Hebe, she didn’t respond for a while. But she is good now. Even made a dark humour joke. An unfunny one. There was also a real mob in the station, five families came to spend the windy season here but there were also free scrap hunters and a couple of weird-looking “policemen” and a guy in rugs who tried to convince the Waters to return to Jesus and got proper peals of laughter. Not to mention the evening train crew, who stayed overnight and we had to collect their bottles all over the building. Plus, young Meggy Straff is still missing although the train left at the crack of dawn.’

‘A lot happened.’

‘As always.’

‘Mathilde.’ She stopped with her hand on the handle. ‘I know that I gave you a hard time with my cry-baby nostalgic period. You know how it is, you can notice that you were a burden only when it’s over. I guess you had a lot of things to deal with, I’m sorry.’

‘I actually enjoyed it pretty much.’

‘You did? Right, I guess nobody’s indispensable.’

‘And it’s better to realize that as soon as possible, Tom. But we still need you. I think the kids were pretty worried about you.’

‘I know,’ he replied with a paper in his hands.

Dear Mr Old Thomas

We know that you may die very soon so we wanted to tell you that it is inevitable (sorry: my mum, year: 2566) and, moreover, it is nice and peaceful (Lu's nanna, she says it all the time). We also however did much research, namely we shut Hebe and start her again because it is easier than killing one person and bringing one person back to life and we have this observations:

Death is short on account that Hebe didn't even noticed that.

Death is nothing special on account that Hebe didn't remember much.

It isn't scary because we asked Hebe if it was scary and she said "no" and we asked her if there was sadness and she said "no" as well as when we asked her if there was pain she said "no" too.

In conclusion we wanted to say that you should take this research seriously and keep in mind its results and don't worry any more.

Hen Water and the Staiton Gang  
(and the Magnificent Prince)

Krystian Pilch

## A Vicious Circle

‘Right, what do we have here? The 26<sup>th</sup> century where people travel among stars and meet aliens at bars? Check. Every local galaxy class ship, except the F3V3R, has an intelligent, self-repairing system? Check. A lonely, old idiot who always picks up any distress call, and he had to pick up the one on a broken F3V3R class cargo shuttle that doesn’t even seem broken? Check.’

‘Negative. You are not alone, bzzt.’

The old man kicked the android standing by his side for its stupid comment, and immediately regretted that. It was an original type of machine, not seen before; it was a cross between a five-feet-tall desk lamp with a thin, robotic arm and a planet exploration rover, probably seen only in museums nowadays. Nevertheless, kicking such a bulky chunk of corroded iron was not the best choice. The old man cursed as he had almost broken his toe.

That was exactly the way the sixty-five-years-old engineer lived. Every time he quarrelled with his wife, and it was almost a weekly routine, he would get on board of some rented Lamborghini (he could not possibly afford a Fiat or a Polonez, which were the real deal in that century, not like the once successful, now pitiful, Italian car make), start the engine, leave the Moon Station 17, and then off to the stars, or at least

beyond the solar system. As a retired engineer (or what he would call himself—engineerus emeritus), he would land on some strayed asteroid and wait for any distress call from an unlucky ship. He would then repair that ship, collect the prize, bring money and some flowers back to the apartment, and beg his wife for forgiveness. She would of course throw away the weeds (as she would call them), take the money, and let him live in their rented apartment for another week. Depending on how much money he brought, she would provide him with two options: sleeping on their yellow sofa or sleeping with her in their/her marriage bed. When she was in a good mood, she would even provide him with a special offer, but it was rather occasional. Not something he would complain about, though.

Nonetheless, sometimes the old man really waited for the moment of solitude, and that day was one of those. At least, up to this moment. As usual, he picked up a distress call and got on board a F3V3R class shuttle, even though he felt in his bones that there was something wrong about it. Firstly, there was no trace of a breach, so the ship could not have been assaulted by pirates hiding in every corner of the galaxy, and there was no damage done to the hull, so the ship could not have crashed or got hit by any asteroid. The reason had to be inside. Then, he docked his Lamborghini to the docking station, made his way inside, checked everything on the bridge, and...nothing. Nothing, apart from the fact that the steering and the life support sys-

tems were completely blocked. To be a bit more precise, he found nothing and no one. Not a single ghost.

‘Maybe you know more, you old piece of junk,’ he turned to the robot again.

‘37, bzzt.’

‘What?’

‘The name assigned to me is 37, bzzt.’

‘So, 37,’ the engineer said, gritting his teeth. He wondered what the robot’s creator had in mind when he was constructing it. Especially when he was installing a speaker for a lamp, and a lamp as an element of its forearm. ‘I hope I’ll get the right command ... Describe the ship’s current status.’

‘Current location: bridge, bzzt.’ The old man got the command right. It was a real nuisance when it came to robots of individual creators. Sometimes, they would give their machines a certain set of rules that would block any attempt to make the robot listen to anyone not knowledgeable about the given string of words. Fortunately, for this robot the common command ‘describe’ worked. That was the only good news, though. ‘Current statu, bzzt, of the vessel: an overheated engine, bzzt, low fuel lev, bzzt. Multiple fuel leaks, bzzt.’

‘Something leaking and something overheated equals something bad,’ concluded the old man. ‘So, I’ve come for nothing. Where is the crew?’

‘Status unknown, bzzt. No crew members on board, bzzt. Possible option one: the crew left the vessel, bzzt. Possible option 2: the crew is deceased, bzzt.’

‘Strange,’ the old man thought. ‘They left the ship, all right, but why would they leave the whole steering system blocked? Any knowledge of that?’

‘Negative, bzzt.’

‘Well,’ the old man sighed. ‘Since there’s nothing to be done, describe where the exit is.’

‘Every docking station blocked from leav, bzzt. Unable to open, bzzt. One exit plausible, bzzt. One rescue pod available, bzzt. You have to go back, bzzt.’

‘Good bye, my old, rented Lamborghini, then ... how am I going to explain that to my doubtfully-better half?’

‘No option available, bzzt.’

‘I hate you, 37. Take me to the way out.’

The old man and the robot left the bridge. The retired engineer was really annoyed, and not because of his wife’s possible reaction. He was once devoted to his job, so he hated leaving things undone. In his youth, he would repair anything and anywhere. He even worked on a cross-galaxy class cruiser once. Sadly, time was moving faster, and so was the technology. It was not that he did not keep up with the times, since he could pick up any nuance of mechanics in a flash. The problem was that his tools were, simply speaking, out of this century, and he could not afford to buy new ones. Still, he tried his best with what he had, helping here and there, and wearing his well-worn uniform. The old man used to joke that its colour was changing along with his hair. Once black and shiny, now grey and faded,



but always clean and prim. Sadly, though, his favourite analogy was getting out of date as well, because there was less and less hair on his head.

Thinking whether it was worthwhile trying to tell the lamp-like robot about this analogy, he passed several rectangular corridors with metal walls, going downstairs, upstairs, right, and upstairs again, right, and so on, and so forth, until he reached a longer corridor. There were arrows on the right wall pointing forward and an arrow on the junction wall pointing to a corridor on the left. It was the typical architecture in such ships that led to where rescue pods were installed.

The old man sighed with relief and said to the robot: 'Come with me, 37.'

'Negative, bzzt,' he heard its metallic response.

'Negative?'

'Positive, bzzt. Negative, bzzt.'

'Why can't you leave?'

'My programming does not allow me, bzzt, to abandon the vessel under any circumstances, bzzt.'

'Is there a command to change your mind?'

'Error, bzzt. I have no mind, bzzt.'

'Bloody ... is there no command to make you come with me?'

'Negati, bzzt.'

The engineer put his hand on the robot's arm and said, feeling somewhat sorry for it:

'Well then, it wasn't really nice to meet you, but I should respect your idiotic programming.'

‘Positive, bzzt. This is mutual, bzzt. Farewell, bzzt,’ the surprising, too-much-human-like answer made the man shiver. He knew that it was simply a machine, but he was one of those people who feared that, in a few hundred years, robots will become like humans. Sometimes, he wondered whether his ancestors also had similar thoughts when creating the first AI machines.

Not wasting time for philosophical matters, the engineer wanted to leave the ship as quickly as possible. He walked towards the junction, not looking back at the robot, turned left, walked straight, turned right and ... he found himself in another corridor. Everything seemed practically the same. There were arrows on the right wall and even a really familiar-looking, lamp-like robot standing inanimate in front of him. All of a sudden, a certain thought sent shivers down his spine.

‘Hey, you!’ he quickly came up to the robot. Its shade turned to him with a creaking sound.

‘Yes, sir, bzzt?’

‘Are you the same robot?’

‘Please specify your question, bzzt.’

‘Oh, heck ... did you see me going there?’ he pointed at the end of the corridor.

‘Positive, bzzt’ was the cold, metallic answer.

The man took a step back as he felt a sudden wave of fear flooding his mind. The situation was not logical. Of course, he tried once again. He turned left, turned right and came out the same way as before.

'You've got to be kidding me,' he commented and tried again. However, the result was still the same.

His brain could not comprehend this state of affairs. He had only some time to leave the ship before the engine would finally react with fuel, and only one corridor was stopping him from gaining freedom.

'37! Is this the only way out?' he pointed at the corridor.

'Positive, bzzt,' stated the machine.

'So why can't I leave?'

'Error, bzzt. You are able to leave, bzzt.'

'But when I turn left, I get back here!'

'Positi, bzzt.'

The old man tried to be really, really patient and beat the robot with its own logic.

'I have to cross this corridor to leave the ship, right?'

'Positive, bzzt.'

'Then why can't I leave it by doing that?'

'Erro, bzzt. You have to go back, bzzt.'

'Do I have to do something back on the bridge or somewhere else?'

'Negative, bzzt.'

'Then why should I go back?'

'You have to go back, bzzt.'

'You're useless!' The engineer had had it. He kicked the robot again and regretted this as before.

He was gasping from running, and his heart was racing. He could not believe the situation in which he found himself that day. Normally, he would be return-

ing to his wife. In fact, the engineer almost missed her at that moment. He concluded then that hard times can really mess with one's mind. He leaned towards the wall as if he wanted to headbutt it, but instead he only closed his eyes and began shouting.

'I had to do this! Bloody hell, why do I always have to do this! I'm going to die because some stupid program won't let me out! Damn it, damn it, damn it! I had to get on board this junk! I knew that something was wrong! A ship ready to blow up. You can get on, but you can't get off! Just perfect! And falling for some automatic distress call! Only a complete idiot would come here willingly!'

'Hello!' His heart almost stopped as he heard the greeting. He instantly turned around and fell on the ground. What he saw before him was a young man, probably in his twenties. He wore an old and slightly over-sized, but surprisingly well-maintained leather jacket with diagonal indigo stripes. The old man saw those numerous times. Symbols of the police. The young man's hair was dark, and his unevenly cut stubble suggested that he did not pay much attention to his appearance. On his head, he was wearing a blue band, also a symbol, preventing his fringe from covering his grey eyes.

'Wh-who are you?' the old man stuttered in astonishment.

'Me? Can't you see?' the young man presented his jacket. 'Sector 150 police. Officer Bolt. James Bolt, heh,'

he chuckled. 'I'm the cavalry, reinforcements, a friendly neighbour police officer, or simply put—your rescuer!'

The old man went silent for a second. Hearing the young man's bullet-fast speech, he thought he was hallucinating. He stopped believing that as soon as the newcomer helped him stand up.

'Wh-why would someone come and rescue me?' the shocked man asked.

'Every ship sends a special radio signal to every other vessel within 157 hundred miles, don't it? You're an engineer, you should know it.'

'How do you... ah, yes, the jacket as well. And the distress call,' the old man was quickly regaining his composure. 'You've also picked it up, right?'

'Yeah, you're lucky. So, I don't like wasting time. Is your job done? Is there someone else?'

'No, the ship can only explode. And no, there's just the two of us. And the robot.'

'So, why are we still chatting? Let's get off it!'

'There's one problem, lad,' said the old man, remembering the whole situation. 'There's a device that prevents us from leaving the ship.'

'Where?'

'Try that corridor, and you'll see.'

The young man shrugged and ran towards the corridor, disappeared behind the junction and appeared again at the beginning behind the old man. The engineer was waiting to see fear changing his expression, but it did not happen. The young man just smiled and exclaimed:

‘Interesting!’

‘Wh-wha . . . you’re mad or something?’

‘Why?’

‘There’s a clock ticking before the junk explodes and all you can say is “interesting”?!’

‘But . . . it is, innit?’

The old man did not know how to comment on that. In just a single day he had managed to meet a lamp-like robot and a police officer taken right from stupid jokes.

‘You’re right, gramps,’ Officer Bolt said with some seriousness in his voice. ‘It’s not a good moment to joke around. Do you know what’s going on here?’

‘I can’t say for sure, because it’s nearly impossible, but I suspect a teleporting looper.’

‘A teleporting looper? I’ve never heard about this!’

‘It’s a small device that creates a masked teleportation gate, so that it seems that you’re walking in circles. You can’t locate the signal, because it can be sent from over 184 yards,’ the old man explained. ‘Still, such a device on a F3V3R class ship? That’s what keeps me from believing it. Then again, this whole place seems rather strange. Its engine and fuel tank are damaged for no reason. Then, there’re no signs of life, but the bridge is completely blocked, so there had to be some captain. Only a captain-ranked person can do this.’

‘Playing detectives is dangerous when the clock is ticking,’ the young man stated, looking at his wrist, although there was no watch on it. ‘Can you disable it?’

‘Of course, but I must return to the bridge first, even though this stupid robot said that it’s no use.’ He threw a hateful glance at the machine. ‘As I said, the signal isn’t easy to track, so I need information. Let’s go!’

They quickly got to the bridge. The computer panels were already shooting sparks in several places and the lamps were blinking. As the engineer sat by one of the screens, the police officer asked him:

‘You said that the bridge was blocked.’

‘Only the steering and the life support,’ the old man explained, tapping different commands. ‘Someone wanted to make it a trap, probably. Of course, the information centre is also blocked, but engineers can override it easily. The steering centre is something beyond our abilities. Hmm, I think I’ve got it!’ the old man remarked, displaying the data. ‘And it’s interesting. This F3V3R class ship was ordered by the police.’

‘I haven’t heard about it,’ the young man replied with astonishment.

‘Some secret stuff, probably. They asked some ... IT geek genius for help, ha! As if some trekkie could help them!’ he chuckled, but the next part surprised him. ‘Oh ... he installed several complicated traps, holograms and, wait for it, loopers! They’re right behind the main console in this room!’

‘That’s what we needed! Atta, gramps!’

‘Don’t call me that!’

The old man still seemed grumpy, but he felt wonderful. He did not know whether it was the adrenaline

rushing in his bloodstream, or the presence of the young man, who was so much like him when he had been young. It was a really refreshing experience for his almost fossilised bones.

‘By the way,’ the young man said, helping the engineer remove the plate covering the back of the main console. ‘If the problem is with the engine, why are the lamps blinking?’

This was actually a really clever question. The old man replied, taking a look inside the cabled panel:

‘Some fuel leaks on the wires, probably. It’s highly corrosive in those kinds of ships.’

‘Then... aren’t fuel and electricity flammable, or even, err... boomable?’

The engineer looked at the police officer, and, as if the latter called for it, a loud bass sound shook everything around, almost deafening them. The whole ship was reverberating with its echo for the next few seconds.

‘Are you all right, gramps?’ asked the young man, helping his companion stand up.

‘You had to say that!’ the old man replied. He was not injured. ‘Can’t you let sleeping dogs lie?!’

‘CRITICAL MALFUNCTION! CRITICAL MALFUNCTION!’ they heard suddenly from the speakers. ‘PROTOCOL ZETA INITIATED! SELF-DESTRUCT IN FOURTEEN MINUTES!’

‘What!?’ they shouted simultaneously.

‘We have to hurry up!’ the old man stated and the police officer could not agree more. ‘Where’s this bloody looper?!’



The lights were still blinking, but their colour had changed to red. Fortunately, the engineer managed to find the device.

‘I need one minute to disable it!’ he stated.

‘Take your time, I’ll get some tea! I always enjoy a fine cuppa!’ the police officer grinned. The engineer did not even want to comment on his state of mind. Then, the young man asked: ‘So, Scotty or LaForge?’

‘Excuse me?’ the old man asked in surprise, not stopping skilfully tampering with the cables.

‘You mentioned “trekkie” a few minutes ago. It’s the 26<sup>th</sup> century and no one watches or even knows about the Star Trek series, although it coined several terms used in today’s technology. Then, as an endangered fan, you must know about those two engineers as well. So, Scotty or La Forge?’

‘SELF-DESTRUCT IN TWELVE MINUTES!’

‘You’re asking now? At the brink of our death, you’re asking me about some old series?’

‘I could always ask you about how you imagined your death if you prefer,’ shrugged the police officer, and did not stop pestering him. ‘So?’

‘Don’t babble when I’m trying to focus!’ the old man scolded him at first, but a few seconds later he added quietly: ‘Scotty.’

‘Oh! I liked LaForge better! Nah, whatever! I knew you’ve watched it! Are you done yet?’

‘I’m ... done!’ the engineer replied as he pulled off one black cable and cut it off. ‘Every looper is now dis-

abled! We'll need at least one minute to reach the rescue pod! Hurry!

'SELF-DESTRUCT IN TEN MINUTES!'

This time, the old man was not in high spirits. He could still feel the same adrenaline, but this was not enough to give his aged body enough energy. The young man noticed that his companion was fatigued, drew his hand through his arm, and helped him.

'You're so young,' the old man remarked, dashing with the police officer through the same, although at that moment rather smoky, corridors. 'You shouldn't risk your life like that.'

'Running is good for your health, gramps.'

'Don't call me ... ah, never mind. Just get us the hell out of here, you crazy lad!'

'SELF-DESTRUCT IN EIGHT MINUTES!'

They finally reached the corridor with the arrows. They also saw the lamp robot still waiting there.

'Hey, Lampy!' said the young man to the machine. 'What are you still doing here? Come with us!'

'Negative, bzzt,' the metallic voice reverberated.

'It's no use, lad. Its orders are to stay on board. We've got no time.'

'I'm not leaving Lampy!' the young man reacted rather emotionally. 'Go and prepare the pod, gramps. I'll be there in a minute.'

'Suit yourself, lad, but I'm not gonna fly away without you!'

The old man, having gathered more strength thanks to his companion, marched away quickly. In the meantime, the young man was trying to persuade the robot.

‘You have to leave, Lampy! Don’t you get that everything’s gonna explode in...’

‘SELF-DESTRUCT IN SIX MINUTES!’

‘Thank you!’

‘I must obey my programming, bzzt. I must remain on this vessel, bzzt.’

The young man did not know what to say. He could not argue with a system based on pure logic. He would have to find an argument that would be strong enough to override the old command. Then, all of a sudden, it came to him. It was so obvious.

‘I’m such an idiot! It’s plain and simple!’ He clapped his hands, and turned to the machine. ‘And you’re an idiot too!’

‘Error, I do not underst, bzzt.’

‘Then listen! You won’t leave this ship under any circumstances, right?’

‘Positi, bzzt.’

‘Your order is to stay on the ship even if it’s gonna blow up, innit?’

‘Positive, bzzt.’

‘Then you have to come with me!’

‘Nega, bzzt.’

‘Oh, but positive, Lampy! Listen! If you don’t come with me, you’ll disobey your programming. Aaand before you “negative” me again, answer me

those two questions,' he showed him his index finger, counting. 'One: are the rescue pods parts of the ship?'

'Positive, bzzt.'

'Two,' he added the middle finger, grinning. 'Since the rescue pods will be the only parts left of this ship after its destruction, would it count as your insubordination if you wilfully did not try to get inside one?'

'Bzzt, bzzt,' the robot had to analyse the argument, but the young man already knew the answer. And he heard it: 'Positive, bzzt.'

'Now, are you coming with me, Lampy?'

'Positive, bzzt.'

'Yeah! I'm the best!' The young man jumped with happiness. 'Follow me! Chop chop! Time's running!'

The young man ran towards the junction, turned left and ... saw something he would have never suspected.

The old man was lying on the ground, unconscious, with a huge bump on his forehead. This, however, was not what made the young man astonished. The shocking fact was the reason why the engineer came into possession of this bump.

A white wall.

'Wh-what?' The police officer's heart sped up. 'B-but the looper stopped working! Why's there a wall?'

'Ugh.' Hearing the police officer's loud voice, the old man woke up. 'Ow, my poor head. Honey Muffin, I think I'll stop visiting Pete's. Their drinks give me all sorts of...' He opened his eyes. 'Nightmares? Fu...'

'SELF-DESTRUCT IN FOUR MINUTES!' the voice coming from the speakers drowned the swearword.

‘A wall! A wall!’ The young man began walking in circles and speaking rapidly. ‘There’s a wall! There shouldn’t be any! The looper was disabled, but there’s a wall anyway!’

‘Stop panicking, lad!’ The old man, already on his feet, grabbed the young man’s right shoulder. ‘There’s still some time, and we need a plan!’

‘I’m making one!’ The young man stood back. ‘Shut it, then! I’m thinking! Shh, shh!’ He was poking his forehead with his index finger. ‘Put all the facts together! Come on!’

The young man got to the corridor again. The old man and the robot followed him up to the other end of the corridor. The engineer was a calm man, but he was also losing his composure. Especially seeing his companion’s current state. He could easily guess what had happened, and he heard the young man figuring it out as well.

‘The looper stopped working, but there was no way to the left anyway. The looper gate was exactly where that wall stood! Then it’s daft, innit?’ he shouted, throwing up his hands. ‘Why would someone create a corridor leading to the rescue pods if you couldn’t use them?’

‘It’s a prison ship,’ the old man stated. ‘I’ve been thinking about it. The police, a cargo F3V3R class ship, loopers ... it leads to only one result. The police wanted a ship which no one could leave. They had to transfer some dangerous criminals, probably...’

‘Hush, I said!’ the young man interrupted, not even listening to him. ‘I’m trying to save your wrinkly arse here!’

‘SELF-DESTRUCT IN TWO MINUTES!’

‘Lad, that’s it,’ hearing the counting, the old man gave up his hopes completely. ‘I can’t believe it, but I miss my trouble and strife now. I really miss her. I really want to go back. Space isn’t a nice place for me anymore.’

‘Positi, bzzt,’ the robot suddenly said. ‘We have to go back, bzzt.’

‘This bloody junk repeats the same shi...’

‘Hang on a tick!’ the police officer interrupted him and approached the robot. ‘Say that again, Lampy!’

‘We have to go back, bzzt.’ The young man cocked his ears when the robot was repeating the sentence. Then, he looked at the walls of the corridor, and a smile appeared on his face again.

‘Oh, I’m so daft!’ He grabbed his head, turning around like a ballet dancer. ‘Can’t you see?! Lampy’s been trying to tell you the way out for the whole time! Look!’ He pointed at the junction. The old man could not understand him. There was only the same wall with the same arrow pointing to the fake left. Seeing the engineer’s expression, the police officer just sighed and commanded the robot:

‘Initiate cargo module! Engage now!’

To the old man, this was something unexpected. His companion knew that the robot could extend its bottom, rover-like body to create an extra space for transportation in the form of a rectangular platform with belts to secure any cargo. The robot was one of its

kind, so the right command (which was different to the usual one—‘Cargo form, transform!’) was something extremely hard to guess. The old man wanted to ask how he could possibly know it, but his companion grabbed him and belted him up to the machine, exclaiming:

‘Brace yourself!’ and turned to the robot: ‘Lampy, full speed ahead!’

This was the next shocking fact for the engineer. The machine he thought to be a piece of junk could drive really, really fast. Alas, once again the old man could not ask how as he had another problem to deal with. They were about to crash against the wall with the arrow in mere seconds.

‘SELF-DESTRUCT IN 60 SECONDS!’

He could not jump off. The belts were holding him tight, and his companion’s grasp was like a vice. However, it was the young man’s mad and paralysing laughter which was preventing him from any reaction.

Two seconds. It was too late to do anything. One second. The old man closed his eyes. Zero.

The old man felt a shudder and heard the tyres squealing. He also felt the young man grabbing his jacket before the robot stopped, so he did not fall over. As he opened his eyes, he saw a round, white rescue pod waiting for them to use it.

‘Chop, chop, gramps!’ the young man said, and he opened the vehicle.

‘But ... but ...’ he only gasped. He was still in shock because when he looked back, the wall was still there.

How did they manage to pass through it? And how did they find themselves in the pod docks?

They got on board the vehicle. The police officer tried to activate the controls.

‘SELF-DESTRUCT IN 20 SECONDS!’

Hearing the counting, the old man suddenly remembered in what situation he was and quickly jumped to the panel.

‘There isn’t any time left to fly away! I’ll raise the shields and give them a boost from the engine! It’s gonna be rough, but we’ll make it alive!’

‘SELF-DESTRUCT IN 10 SECONDS!’

He did what he said, and exclaimed:

‘Now you brace yourself!’

They heard the sound of the exploding engine and then, on the pod’s main screen, they saw a huge ball of fire coming at them like a dragon with its jaws wide open.

They were eaten whole and the darkness followed.

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‘All life functions in norm, bzzt. He is waki, bzzt,’ the robot said as the young man woke up. Having carefully stood from the bed, feeling like his head was turning around, he approached the old man sitting and navigating the pod. They were safe. They had survived.

‘How’s the sleeping princess?’ the engineer greeted him, still looking at the main screen.

‘If there was one by my side, I wouldn’t complain,’ he replied, feeling a bit better. ‘Oh, that was fun!’



‘Fun?’ the old man turned to him. ‘How can you say that? We could have died in there!’

‘We’re rather alive. Now, have you guessed already how I knew about the wall?’

The old man turned back to the console. He answered, but he seemed somewhat grim all of a sudden:

‘We found out on the bridge that the ship had loopers. But we didn’t even pay attention to that small piece of information about holograms. The wall with the arrow was a hologram and our way out. We didn’t even have to disable anything.’

‘Aaand?’ the young man demanded more.

‘I’ve no idea how you figured it out.’

‘But it’s so simple! Look! An IT geek genius! G-E-E-K! G-E-N-I-U-S! And I-T! That’s what they called him in the ship’s log! They needed someone exceptionally clever to build this prison ship, so they employed a geek genius. Plus, our stuttering robot!’

‘Stuttering?’ The old man seemed interested, but his grim expression did not disappear. The young man ignored that and continued.

‘Yes, Lamy’s been stuttering all the time! Sometimes you can hear it better, but sometimes it’s not so obvious. Now, put these facts together, and you have the answer!’

‘Just say it.’ The old man was seemingly in no mood for guessing. Nevertheless, he knew that he would not be able to figure it out in ages. Hence, the answer surprised him.

‘Backspace!’

‘Backspace?’

‘Backspace! If you want to go “back” to “space”, you must go through the wall using the symbol of that very key! The arrow to the left! Backspace!’

‘Positive, bzzt! You need to go back, bzzt!’ the robot said suddenly. The old man understood. The machine could not pronounce ‘backspace’ because of its stutter. The designer of this ship wanted to build it in such a way that no one boarding it could leave if he was not knowledgeable about the loopers and holograms. This made the old man even more stressed as his fears were coming true. He had suspected something from the very beginning, but his mind had been consumed with planning on how to leave the vessel. However, he was finally sure and ready. He quickly pushed a button on the panel, and the young man was immediately tied by cables that came out from the ceiling. He had prepared that when the young man was unconscious.

‘What’re you doing, gramps?!’ he exclaimed, thrashing around.

‘Stop that bloody acting!’ the engineer shouted and stood up. He was sweating, but he was trying to hide his stress. ‘Put all the facts together?! Yes?! That’s exactly what I did!’

‘What’re you talking about?! Let me out!’

‘QUIT YER TALKIN’ ALREADY!’ This made the police officer finally go silent. The engineer sighed and, after taking a deep breath, continued: ‘A ship left intact from

the outside. No crew members. No signs of it having been abandoned. In addition, it happens to be a prison ship. An IT genius employed to create a system that is even more impenetrable than in any prison. A police officer appearing from nowhere, and he's not even surprised seeing a looped corridor. A police officer wearing a jacket that is too loose for him. A police officer who's not a police officer at all! You're one of the prisoners!

At first, the young man seemed only surprised, but then his expression changed completely. The everlasting smile disappeared, and his lips became terribly narrow. His eyes became hollow, not showing any emotion. When he began speaking, his voice was calm, elegant, but also sheer cold.

'I must congratulate you on this outstanding deduction. One correction: I am not one of the prisoners. I am the only prisoner.'

'Th-that's not all!' The old man was terrified, but he was fighting with all his remaining strength. He wanted to finish this, and he continued: 'You seemed to know the robot from the very beginning. You've been even using a name for it, and you were too emotional about its decision to stay. Plus, you knew about its transportation mode and how to initiate it!'

The prisoner was silent for a moment, looking at the robot. Then, his eyes turned to the old man. It was not a pleasant experience.

'Indeed, I have been friends with Lampy since they imprisoned me on this ship. I was to be transported to

a different galaxy and executed there, with a month of diversified tortures preceding my death. As this prospect was far from pleasing, I decided to flee. As soon as I left my prison cell, I killed the crew members, all five of them, and hid their bodies. I must say that even though I had no respect for them as their hospitality left much to be desired, their death was quick and painless. There was no blood, either, since I can take lives without spilling it everywhere. Years of practice give you that useful ability. Unfortunately, the captain was a brave man. Knowing that his death was imminent, he blocked the steering and the life support systems, immobilising the ship completely and creating an inescapable trap. I believe that a certain question is arising in your mind.'

'Why didn't he send any signal for help?' the old man asked, trying not to shiver while listening to the story.

'This is the part where I made a grave mistake. I had managed to destroy every means of communication to separate the crew members from any external help. I had to kill them one by one, which would not be possible for me without alarming them. As a result, I was imprisoned again, but my cell became bigger. No communication. No steering. No life support. My clock was slowly ticking. Without life support, one has about three days before freezing to death. Of course, I had my only friend, Lampy, but I could not use his knowledge in any way. Even if he had given me the same answer concerning "back", without the piece of infor-

mation about the prison ship's constructor, loopers and holograms, I would not have been able to deduce the hidden gate to the pod docks. My only hope was in risking everything. I damaged the engine and drilled holes in the fuel tank. I knew that a distress call was the only independent emergency way of signalling that a ship was damaged, and I knew that it could work even when the communication was faulty. I had hoped for a police patrol, however, when you appeared, I decided to use your knowledge instead, and then to leave this solar system silently, without making the local police aware of my location.'

The old man could not believe his ears. His trip to earn some money had changed into a criminal story. Then, the next sentence uttered by the prisoner frightened him even more.

'Before I kill you, I want you to know something,' his cold voice echoed in the pod. 'You are an extraordinary man. I am sure that your past, which is several years longer than mine, tells the story of a hard-working, strong-willed man, who became a talented engineer. But...'. He made a brief pause before continuing. A meaningful pause announcing the coming of something ominous. 'I have lived longer than you, even though I am much younger.'

The old man did not understand his words, but for some reason they sounded true for him. The old-young man continued, making each sentence sound more and more powerful.

‘What defines my age is my despair. It oftentimes makes every second of my life last forever. At those very moments when the memories of what they took from me return. I try everything to conceal those, but as soon as I manage to find a quantum of solace, the hounds of law find me and remind me of what they did to me by blaming me for everything. Thus, I must run, and kill again, and learn how to survive in this supposedly endless universe in which I cannot find even a single place to live peacefully, and I must adjust to new environments, and everywhere, no matter how far away I run, they keep coming for me, and they remind me of what I have not done, and I kill them, and again, and again, and again I run in this endless loop, in this cursed vicious circle without any possible way out!’

He stopped. His face was covered with sweat and anger. The old man listened to him carefully. His heart was not racing anymore and he did not even feel any stress. Everything had to give way to a new emotion, which was compassion.

‘Maybe,’ the engineer began slowly. ‘Maybe you just need someone, like today, who could help you get out from this loop? You’ve been all alone so far, so maybe, just maybe, I could be the one to help set you free?’

‘It is beyond anyone’s capabilities. They will try to hunt me down. For what I have done up until now, the intergalactic law provides me with no other choice but to die the most painful way possible. As I said, you are really an extraordinary man. Even in the face of immi-

nent death, you are doing everything to save yourself.'

'Hell with myself! I'm talking about you!' the engineer replied with anger, not even paying attention to the death threat. 'I need you to know one thing! Okay, my life's been easy, but I've also fallen into a loop! I have a terrible wife, no job, heck, even my Lamborghini got destroyed by something that the insurance won't cover! And I know I can't compare it to your screwed up life, but hear me out!' The old man approached him and, smiling, he said fearlessly: 'You've made me feel free today! This has been the day of my life! Why don't we share it! Look! Can't you see that I haven't called the police even though I could have? I saw you trying to persuade the robot to come with us! This was the real you, not the cold one here! So? Will you let me help you?'

His eyes were shining with the light of hope. However, this was not enough for the prisoner. His eyes were so full of despair that no light could brighten them.

The old man could not believe it. He could not comprehend in what way someone could damage such a young soul so irreversibly. The prisoner said coldly:

'I believe I have missed the part about how I got out of my cell. The reason is simple. I befriended Lampy and learnt several of his commands. Simply by asking him. This is one of them, a pretty universal one. Release me!'

Suddenly, the robot's arm extended and transformed into a pair of scissors that cut off the cables

restraining the prisoner, who instantly grabbed one of them and wrapped it around the old man's throat. The engineer fell on the ground, with his consciousness fading away as the cold piece of metal was preventing him from breathing. He wanted to say one more thing. He went to extremes just to try, and he finally uttered it with a dying voice:

'Thank you, lad.'

'Farewell ... gramps,' the old man heard before falling into darkness.

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He woke up suddenly, not remembering for a moment what had happened. He looked around, and the first thing he saw was the ugly face of his fat wife. Actually, it was the first time it looked quite acceptable. However, her low, hoarse voice, reminding him of a dying horse, could not be music to his ears. Even after the near-death experience.

'Where have you been gadding around for so long?! What the hell are those bruises on your neck?! And where the fu...'

'Shut up!' he silenced her, which surprised them both. Then, he asked in a calmer tone: 'Where am I? Hmm? A hospital?' he deducted from the white bed sheet and the bed he was lying on, as well as his bandaged throat, and doctors in white coats running to and fro. 'How did I get here?'

'Someone brought you here! You were unconscious! Good grief, you're always bringing me only troubles!'



‘This someone, where is he?’

‘Vanished! Like I care!’

‘He’s younger than me, then he’s older than me, and now he’s making his first steps just like a baby ... again, and again, and again...’

‘What are you mumbling about? Better think about some money to pay for the hospital! I’m not giving you...’

But he was not listening to her complaints. He was looking at the ceiling, thinking about the decision made by the mysterious young man. Then, he smiled as he remembered his impossible adventure on the prison ship. He made up his mind then. He did not want to go back home.

He wanted to go back, bzzt.



Gintarė Gustaitytė  
**Crimson**

Leonard has never been to this part of town before. A narrow labyrinth of old streets in desperate need of renovation was illuminated by a faint yellow light of street lights on that dark spring morning.

This was it, this huge building. Leonard wasn't quite ready yet. He stepped away and sneaked into an alleyway. Had to check if his hairstyle was still in place. *Maybe the shiny earring was too much?*

Leonard got back to the hauntingly cold-looking building and sighed. *Time to shine, Leo.* He pressed the sleek black buzzer, which took a moment to find as it blended in with the glass wall. There was a camera above the door. After a moment, the double door opened.

A man wearing an obviously expensive indigo suit was waiting on the other side with a bored expression on his handsome face.

"Leonard Scott?" he asked in a thick French accent.

"Yes," Leonard said, feeling the urge to turn around and escape the place. *How does he know my name? Oh, the CV, right.*

Dark walls, glass floors, black leather furniture. The room was illuminated by fluorescent lamps fixed in a symmetrical pattern on the ceiling. *I should have taken the earring out.*

"Can I see your ID?" the man asked.

“Oh. Of course,” Leonard stammered and smiled at the taller man but the man’s face remained emotionless. Without any comments, he handed the ID card back.

“This way,” said the man and led Leonard through the corridor.

Leonard stepped through the open door inside a room which had a burgundy-colored minimalistic decor. A young-looking blonde woman with beautifully braided hair sat behind the mahogany desk. Leonard could feel the authoritative air around her.

“Hello. My name is Claudia. And you are ... Leonard Scott, correct?”

Leonard sat down in one of the two fancy-looking black wooden chairs that stood opposite Claudia’s chair, separated by a huge desk. He had to fight the instinct to just bolt out the door.

“You seem like a perfect candidate for the position. However, I am a little concerned about your job experience. It says you only worked at the Institute of Genetics in Sweden. I don’t see how it relates to your profession or the job that you are applying for,” Claudia said in a rushed manner.

“I wasn’t sure how to fill in the details in my application. Um...it wasn’t stated what sort of products your company specializes in so I...I’m not sure if my qualifications will fit your expectations,” Leonard said slowly, trying to choose the right words.

“As our manager should have informed you, the main ‘Crimson’ product is blood. The company does

have separate branches which sell other products, mostly to do with disinfection, and recently we started our fashion line, but we are not sure if that is going to work,” she stated in a calm monotone.

Leonard’s brows furrowed and he felt like a small child who had walked in on an adult conversation and didn’t fully understand what was going on, having too many questions at once, but not wanting to look like a fool if he asked.

“Blood?” Leonard finally asked.

“Blood. Human blood. We’re competing with another company and need to think of something. Kira must have told you everything about it,” Claudia said, irritation obvious in her melodic voice.

Leonard shook his head slightly. “Who’s Kira?”

Claudia sighed. “Kira Nautaros is our staff manager. She was assigned to find a new food scientist who would be willing to work as a quality manager for our products,” she explained.

“I... I found the advertisement on the wall of the nightclub which is just t-there, on the other side of this building...” Leonard mumbled. As he thought better of it, the nightclub did seem a bit shady.

Claudia closed her eyes and took a deep breath. “Enough,” she interrupted coldly, then pulled out her phone to call someone as she stood up and stormed out of the room, leaving Leonard alone.

Those excruciatingly long next few minutes dragged on so slowly that Leonard began to shake and he stood up and sat back down at least three times.

Finally, Claudia returned with a blue-haired woman trailing behind her. The woman was quite the character—she was wearing a tight raspberry pink suit despite her curvy appearance. An attractive woman, though with that layer of make-up it was hard to tell.

Claudia sat back down in her chair and crossed her arms over her chest.

The blue-haired woman sat beside Leonard, on one of the two chairs opposite Claudia's.

"Do you know him, Kira?" Claudia asked.

The blue-haired woman, Kira, turned towards Leonard and smiled brightly. "Hello. I'm Kira. Who are you?" she asked in a shrill voice and extended her hand.

"Leonard Scott," he said and took Kira's hand. It was soft and cold.

Kira turned to Claudia again. "I know him now," she said in a teasing tone.

Claudia closed her eyes and rubbed her forehead for a moment.

"You said his qualifications are perfect and now I can see he's cute. So, what's the problem?" Kira asked.

Claudia fixed Kira with a scornful glare. "We could be found out. Do you realize how many people could have seen that advertisement?" she asked.

"I researched him, then placed the advertisement for him to see. It wasn't on that wall for long. Nobody else paid any attention to it," Kira said with an easy smile.

Claudia raised her eyebrows just slightly. "I see."

She turned to look at Leonard. "Your qualifications are exceptional. Therefore, I am willing to offer you a choice. Well, not *really* a choice," Claudia said.

"Okay?" Leonard answered, feeling a bit faint as both women stared down at him.

"The good news is that you are getting the job," Claudia said and waited for Leonard to ask what the bad news was. He didn't.

"The bad news, for you, is that you will not go back to your previous life. We will provide you with a place to live and everything else you might need. Also, you will have to sign a lifelong contract," Claudia said and started searching in her desk drawer. She pulled out a pile of papers and placed them in front of Leonard.

"What if I don't agree?" Leonard asked, his voice trembling slightly despite his strong efforts to stay calm.

Kira smiled wildly and brushed her hand across Leonard's cheek. He recoiled.

"We can always just drink you dry," she said. This time she gave him a toothy smile which was even more unsettling.

Leonard shook his head. He must be dreaming. Except that it all seemed very real. He tightened his hand into a fist as hard as he could, until his nails pressed hard into his skin. The pain felt real.

"How much will you pay me?" Leonard asked.

Claudia skimmed through the papers on the table and pointed with her beautifully manicured finger to the line that answered his question.

“Does that seem like a fair amount?” Claudia asked.  
Leonard looked at the figure a little dumbfounded.  
It was a ridiculous amount of money.

“Yeah,” he said awkwardly.

“Alright then, do we have an agreement?” the blond woman asked.

“Yes,” Leonard answered.

Kira chuckled and ruffled Leonard’s perfectly styled hair. He hated it when people touched his hair.

“Welcome to the team.”



Klaudia Bielecka  
**The Phone Calls**

<the first phone call>

You didn't pick up, I'm recording myself now. Well, I don't know if I have the right number. Maybe it's not you I'm speaking to ... Maybe I am just talking into the abyss. But I got connected, so ... It's me, Moira. You've seen me before, seen my name on my badge. You talked to me. You told me how you don't pick up calls from numbers you don't recognize. I hope you remember. Actually, I'm *sure* you remember. I've seen your face and you've seen mine, and we've seen this other face too, together. It is something you cannot forget ... I bet you are surprised hearing my voice. It's not how you imagined it now, is it? Hard to tell basing on the scream alone, right? I'm calling because I want to know, I need to know if you experience the same thing that I do. You know, the shift...? Or maybe you don't know. It's hard to explain if you don't experience it. But I do. I feel like I'm out of my lifeline at the moment, like this is some error.

Have you ever seen a group photo where all people pose and look perfectly sharp, except for one, who moved and looks like a dead fly smeared on your car's windshield? I am the fly. I'm taking more space in time, I'm spread across the duration of this call like back-

ground noise, I'm a translucent layer of existence, but I'm not a ghost, I have a body. And I'm using my Nokia. Ghosts don't clutch a mobile in their hand staring at the clock that moves very slowly and then too fast. At least I think so ... Don't you think this recording is longer than generally allowed? Maybe normal time rules don't apply to me anymore. Maybe they don't apply to either of us. I'm thinking about that face we've seen and why it had such an effect on me. And I can't remember what it looked like, but I know that face. I know that man. I have his name on the tip of my tongue together with the fleeting memory of his face. We've been at one of those places selling breakfasts, pie and coffee. Me as a waitress and you as a client. You gave me your order with a bunch of unnecessary information. I brought you your order. It was scrambled eggs, banana pancakes and espresso. You told me I looked pretty. I didn't smile. Not because I don't like compliments, but because I had noticed his reflection in the window. He had been in the corner of my eye a second before we twisted our heads towards the sound of the bell by the door. Funny, but I think he was shocked that we saw him. He didn't expect us to.

I think I went faster forward a little now. I'm looking at my graduation pictures. At one picture in particular. I don't know who took it, but it wasn't the photographer. It's me, sitting between other students, looking straight at the camera. Why don't I remember that? I've looked at those pictures hundreds of times and never paid enough attention to notice. I think it's fascinating and a

bit scary that we exist vividly in the memories of others in moments we didn't even register. Like this photo. Someone preserved that image of me because it must have seemed important for them. And I don't remember.

That shift in time gives me a new perspective, a wider one. I used to be like a series of disconnected photos, now I am a 360-degree movie. I will find out who that face was.

I'm sorry, I have someone on the line, I'll call you again later. Bye.

<the second phone call>

Hi, it's me again, the beanery girl. That man, with the unrecognizable, *smudged* face, called me. He said it's him and I believe that. He said he heard my recording. How did he hear that? But he did. He seemed ... polite? Nice even. Not like a salesman, really, genuinely nice. His voice was warm and deep, almost attractive. 'I'm glad that I'm not alone,' he said, 'I'm glad that this world is not empty. I thought I would never see anyone else like me.' He proceeded to describe what had happened that day from his perspective. I was stunned. He told me more ... a story about himself, and it moved me. Like, not literally, I'm already moving in some weird metaphysical way, but he moved my heart. He really did. And I'm beginning to understand my position ... \*long pause\* I will try to repeat it, from the very start.

He was fifty. Well, he still is. He had a job, a car, a dog and a person he loved. He was normal. Flat in time,

like I used to be, going with the stream. And he loved that, he loved the stable, linear life he had. His simple, yet satisfying work, the smell of the inside of his car, his dog's wagging tail, the kisses he shared with his husband... Yet every day he felt like he already was there, done that, a constant *déjà vu* that wouldn't let him be at peace with himself. And he curses himself for that, but one evening he went out seeking for a thrill. He sure found something, but it was more than a thrill, it was like an earthquake. It was an error in reality. Some kind of glitch, he called it. He was walking down the street and saw a place before him made of two places. Two buildings morphed into... Well, it didn't look like a whole new building, rather like layers in a cake probably. The man, Victor his name is, which I didn't mention... he said it was like a thing you see riding on a carousel, but more solid. It looks like a layer cake to me when I imagine it. Anyway, it was the first time he saw a shift, and if you start seeing it, you cannot stop, and you start to live in it. Or maybe the shift starts to live in you. We couldn't agree on that.

He was scared back then, seeing that monstrosity of broken time and space. He believes he screamed, but he can't be sure. Just like me when I saw him. Did I really scream? Were people looking at me? I can't tell, all I know is that I went home and I'm here right now. It's dark outside. There is a stray cat down on the street. He is hovering a bit over the ground. Jumping really, just really slow... So later he read in a newspaper that, in

that place he saw, a building was pulled down and in its place a new one is being built. Oh, the cat landed and ran away. Sorry, I'm getting distracted, I'm starting to get it, how it works. I can't explain. I mean, I am trying all the time, but... He went home, too, and he was confused, had to figure everything out for himself. His husband wasn't there, only their dog, asleep. He touched it, tried to pet it, but the dog didn't wake up. It was definitely warm, alive, but not reacting. He was standing there for a moment. The dog moved, raised its head slowly, but not finding his master, came back to sleep. He slept in his own house and everything seemed normal.

He saw his lover in the kitchen some time later, huh, *time*... but they couldn't speak with each other. His husband could not see him and when he reached out and touched him, it was barely a split second of presence, for him real, but for his partner unnoticed, and haunting, and not in a good way. He was trying to make contact. After many failed attempts, he just wrote a letter. A letter like my call to you, only much more intimate. It wasn't easy, they exchanged a few, but the letters were never in chronological order and even if he had a house, a car, a dog and a significant other, it was out of his reach in a way. He gave up. He left and doesn't go there anymore. Now that I'm thinking about it, if people think I'm missing, will they sell my flat soon? And will it even affect me?

Oh, Victor will come to me when I finish this recording. I know it. I know what he will say. I know many new things. Sadly.

As for that day ... He was just wandering around and wanted a pie, his plan was to just take it from the kitchen. People notice it when he takes or misplaces something, but they are keen to believe in their own forgetfulness. When someone thinks they left a remote on the sofa and find it in a completely different place without recognition as to how it got there, it's usually them. And sometimes, rarely, Victor. He just uses that phenomenon as an excuse to live in other people's homes. When he entered the beanery I noticed him and, indeed, he was startled. But you ... you didn't notice him, you were just staring at the door because you heard the bell, yet not seeing anyone coming. I assumed too much. Victor wanted to explain, but I ran out. He claims that the transfer from my usual self to the shifted self was immediate, but I was blinking in and out of existence in my ... your timeline.

It doesn't explain everything, but now I know Victor's face as I am going to meet him in a few minutes and ... effectively, we *all* live in the same space. So I'm not a ghost. Not that kind of ghost, at least. The world hasn't changed for anyone, only for me and Victor, because we saw what we weren't supposed to see, like Bluebeard's wife. We are in a new ... dimension, I guess? We walk the same streets, we see other people, but we are like a movie and you ... Well, you stay like paintings for us when we walk among you as a society, bumping into you, eating your food and sleeping in your houses. You know we are there, but our times

don't match, so you barely notice our presence. I don't know if voice can travel between those dimensions. Maybe not. Probably, my confessions are futile at this point, were nonsense from the start. But I wanted to say this out loud. Even if only for myself. Say good bye to my life. The number on the napkin could belong to anyone, not only you, but I meant this voicemail to be for you. Okay. I ... that's all.

Good night.

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You came back home. You took off your coat and your shoes. You left the groceries in the kitchen. Then you went to the living room. You saw a red light blinking on your answering machine, so you clicked the button to hear it. The recording was twenty seconds of noise, lines over lines of someone speaking to you, deformed and scary. It always is. You get those voicemails all the time. They don't bother you, for some reason. Tomorrow you go to this beanery downtown, to drink some coffee, maybe eat banana pancakes and scrambled eggs.





Lina Paukštytė

## Control

If you had seen it from afar, it would have looked innocent—just a girl with blue hair talking to a bus driver. Two harmless strangers seeking refuge from the cold in a late-night bus.

“I did not mean to scare you,” said Ruth slowly, snapping her fingers in an intoxicating rhythm. “In fact, that is the opposite of what I wanted to do.”

“What the fuck do you want?” the Driver said, panicking slightly. He should not be scared of a girl with greasy blue hair.

“I just want you to feel safe,” she said, snapping her fingers in a slow, slow rhythm. One. Two. Three. One. Two. Three. “Do you feel safe?” she asked. The monotonous snapping blocked out the sound of the wind and a distant barking dog outside. There was only her and the rhythm.

One. Two. Three.

“Yes,” he said. A gilded chain around his neck twinkled in the dim light.

“Good. What’s your name?” she asked.

“Eddy.”

Ruth felt satisfaction in decoding people. It fascinated her that even the most rigid people had a soft side. Even this man with yellowish skin from all the cigarettes and beer, who drove the intercity bus, who seemed to hate everyone, was fragile.

“Okay, Eddy. Go to your safe place,” she said, snapping the mesmerising rhythm. “Where are you?”

“On a beach, where grandma would take me.”

“Can you feel the sand under your bare soles?”

“Yes.”

“What does it feel like?”

“It’s warm ... It tickles.”

“It’s a pleasant feeling,” she said.

“It is,” he agreed.

She almost felt sorry for him. He *was* being robbed. But they needed money. And he should not have given the stink eye to Adam.

And just as Eddy sunk into a trance, a dark and strong figure emerged from the shadow. It was Adam’s turn now. Ruth was gifted at making people feel safe and luring them into trances, but her frail physique did not affect actions.

Adam, on the other hand, had a gift from Gods to manipulate people. No doubt in his voice, no shivering, just instructions made of steel. Sometimes it occurred to him that he might be a God himself.

“Now I will count to ten, and the snapping will stop,” Ruth said. She counted, following each number with a snap of her fingers, slowly getting to the ten. And then there was silence. Eddy’s muscles tensed, making his palm clutch the handles of the seat, turning his yellow finger nails white. A salty drop of sweat ran down his forehead. His eyes moved rapidly under shut lids. He was in a void of trance. Locked in his own body

without a key at his reach. A second too long in this state, and the person is gone.

“You are in a big, white room with one window now,” Adam said.

The driver loosened his fingers and they regained their previous, yellowish shade.

“There is a table in the middle of the room. Describe it.”

“It’s a wooden coffee table with a little white cloth on it. Just like mama had in her room.”

“Put your wallet on it.” Adam said. Eddy took his worn-down faux leather wallet from the inside pocket of his uniform jacket and put it onto the panel before him.

Ruth snatched the wallet and went straight for the money. *Work fast.* Those were the instructions before their first “mission”. Well, her first “mission”. Adam had plenty of practice, but would rather have his tongue cut out than admit that he was not capable of something.

Their first session wasn’t a failure. The All-Purpose-Serum sales guy fell into a trance before he could even introduce his business scheme. His pants were slightly too short and his watch was almost hidden under the sleeve of his shirt. This was his best suit. Ruth did all she possibly could to make him take off the watch, but the commands bounced off him like rubber balls off a brick wall.

“Remove the watch,” Adam said and the wall collapsed. The sales guy removed the watch without the slightest doubt, without a hint of resistance. Ruth

grabbed the loot and hid it inside her pocket. Using short, cold and clear commands, Adam led the guy out of the trance, making sure that he believed he had made the deal of his life.

The prey of the session, on the other hand, was worthless. The same day they found out that no pawnshop would buy anything from either of them. They told Ruth to beat it, or they would tell her daddy that she took his watch. "You wouldn't want that, would you, honey? You're a good girl, aren't you?" they said.

When Adam attempted to sell the watch, he was told it was rubbish. They settled for a ridiculous price that didn't even cover the price of their lunch. Adam was furious. Since then, there was a second rule. *Cash only*.

That's why she almost dropped the wallet when she heard Adam.

"Take off your chain," Adam said. His eagle eyes were locked on the prey.

The driver didn't move. Ruth stood stone still with her gaze fixed on Adam.

"What are you doing?" she whispered.

"Take. Off. Your. Chain."

Eddy clutched the seat handles. He was resisting. Adam frowned the way a strict teacher frowns at a disobedient child. *Okay*, he thought.

"I will count to five and the room will melt away," Adam said. Eddy inhaled shallow and rapid gulps of air.

One. His forehead shined with sweat.

Two. A paralyzing void seeped through the melting walls.

Three. Coldness disabled his body and mind. Only his eyes shuttled under the heavy eyelids.

Four. He stood on a chunk of floor like on a melting piece of ice in an endless, dark ocean.

Five. He fell into the overwhelming nothingness.

Adam was satisfied. The driver had disobeyed. And disobeying scum needs to—no, must—be punished. He admired the paralysed body, with a man drowning inside of it. Adam was a righteous executioner. He could control people. He could delete people.

“You feel solid ground under your feet. It’s sand,” Ruth said. “You are on the beach your grandma used to take you to,” she said, clutching her trembling palms. She was a mouse teasing a tiger.

“What does this mean, Ruth?” Adam said, piercing her. His chest felt like a tight fist full of sand. It was crumbling away. He straightened his back and stood taller. Ruth looked at the dirty floor.

“You were torturing him,” she said. “We don’t torture people.”

“Know your place, Ruth.”

The air around them buzzed with tension. Ruth’s eyes watered. It was stupid to cry. With all her essence, she knew she was right.

“We don’t torture people,” she said.

"You don't get to tell me what to do!" A vein popped on his neck. "*I have the control!*"

She stood face to face with Adam.

"You would kill a man for a stupid chain?" she said, meeting Adam's glare. She had to force herself not to look away. "If you need it so much, just take it," she said, ripping the chain off the driver's neck.

Adam snatched the chain.

"It's NOT about the chain," Adam said, throwing it aside. "He's just a piece of disrespectful trash."

"So he deserves to be dissolved?"

"He deserves to learn some respect."

"Learn respect? You think you are the one to teach it?" she said, looking for a hint of modesty in him.

"Frankly—yes."

His answer struck Ruth like a lightning. *You're sick.*

"You're a thief," she said. "We are thieves. You don't deserve to teach."

"I disagree, Ruth," he said, stepping closer to her. "Don't forget who taught you *everything* you know. Don't forget who's in control."

"You didn't teach me *everything*. You taught me hypnosis," she said. "And talked me into dropping out of school."

"You would be nothing without me," he said, gripping her by her scarf.

"You are nothing with me," she said, looking him dead in the eye. Adam's hand twitched. "Go on, hit me. It will just prove my point."

He shoved her into a wall and stepped back. Ruth fell to her knees.

"You are a disgrace," he said. "You are nothing. Go on, save all the filth you want. I don't need you."

Ruth gathered her strength and stood up.

"Fine. Say anything you want. But know that," she glared at him. "You don't control me."

"We'll see about that," said Adam. "You will come crawling back to me." He spat out. He kicked something on his way out, and a second later the cold darkness outside swallowed him.

Ruth drew a long breath to gather the pieces of herself together. Her heart was pounding and her hands were shivering like leaves in the wind. But she was okay. She was going to be okay.

Still shaking, she jumped to Eddy. He was wondering in the realm of the Subconscious mind without guidance. His breath was shallow and slow.

Ruth picked up the gilded chain and squeezed it.

"Eddy, can you hear me?" she said. Silence. One second. Two seconds. Three seconds. Ruth bit her lip. *Please, don't walk away.*

"Yes," he said. Ruth sighed in relief.

"Are you still on the beach?"

"No."

"Where are you?"

"In the hospital, where Sarah was born."

"Is she your daughter?"

"Yes."

*Let's do this*, she thought. For Sarah.

"I need you to come back to your safe place," she said. "Can you describe it?"

After a moment of silence, Eddy described the sunny beach with greenish water. Ruth asked him to concentrate on the sand. On the way it looks. Feels. Smells. She asked to identify every grain. She did this to gather him and prepare him for waking up.

She put his wallet, with all the money, on the dashboard. Then looked at her palm with a chain.

"Can you remember the chain you wear around your neck?"

"Yes."

"Why is it important?"

"Sarah gave it to me after I broke my leg."

Ruth put the chain next to the wallet. It was time to let him go.

"Now I will count from ten to one, you will wake up and won't remember either me, or Adam."

Ten. You come back to your body.

Nine. You are aware of your limbs.

Eight. Your muscles relax.

Seven. Your fingers are easy to move.

Six. You are aware of the seat against your back.

Five. You can hear the sounds outside.

Four. You are aware of the smells around you.

Three. You are almost ready to wake up.

Two. Prepare to open your eyes.

One. You're up.



“I’m up,” Eddy said to the empty bus. His head was ringing with pain. He thought of Sarah. And the colour blue. He wasn’t sure why.

After the bus had left, Ruth walked away to no destination. The ghostly moon kept her company in the freezing night. Her feet indented the fresh snow. *I am in control*, she thought and the naked branches moved in the wind as if agreeing with her.



Alicja Lasak

## **A Runaway...**

In the cold light of morning, Amy was gazing at an angular full-length mirror. A roundish reflexion of her body stared back at her. She opened a huge wardrobe and looked at her clothes, then at the shadowy silhouette reflected in the mirror, again at the clothes, and she sighed with agitation. There were lots of dresses, skirts, blouses and cardigans, all of them neatly ironed, well-maintained and of top quality. She could wear any of them and look like a gorgeous woman, even like a duchess, or simply like a decent human being. She was shuffling her clothes, rearranging them, fingering every item. The longer she did this, the more difficult the decision was: which one should I wear today? A flared maroon skirt? A long-sleeved pink shirt? A purple dress trimmed with lace? Which one? A polka dot mini skirt? A parsley cowl neck blouse? A frilly scarlet dress? Which one? Suddenly, she came across a pair of jeans. She took them gently in her hands, smoothed the denim fabric, and smelled their subtle fragrance. They used to be her favourite jeans. Will she ever wear them again? Will she ever wear any jeans? She slammed the wardrobe door with sheer exasperation.

It was obvious that she should eat breakfast before going out. So she entered her kitchen, the room that made her feel frustrated and timid, and she started to

examine her food supplies. There was a set of rules that she imposed on herself: she must not eat after twilight, she should always leave some scraps of food on her plate and she could eat only things that were on the verge of going rotten. Day after day, it was exceedingly difficult for her to summon enough willpower to swallow anything.

‘Eat me with a knob of creamy butter, a slice of ham and two pieces of a plum tomato. Sprinkle me with a handful of grated cheese. Eat me as a so-called normal average person does,’ a crusty wholemeal roll grinned at her.

‘Wait a second. There are people who do without breakfast and they do pretty well,’ a piece of toast parted its stale lips.

Feeling fed up with bread, she turned to the refrigerator humming in the kitchen corner, and cautiously peeped into it.

‘I’m wilting. Eat me before I become completely inedible,’ cried a lettuce leaf.

‘Prepare scrambled eggs,’ suggested a pair of eggs popping out of a cardboard box. ‘An ordinary person will have scrambled eggs with bacon for breakfast.’

‘I’m going to turn rancid if you don’t eat me,’ moaned low-fat cottage cheese.

She felt insulted by the contents of her refrigerator. Why did she actually store them in there? Saving food for a rainy day lulled her into a false sense of security. Something had to be kept in the fridge just in case. Besides that, she showed dogged perseverance in

avoiding food. She could sniff at it and let it wait till the best-before-date.

After filling her growling stomach with a cup of green tea and a piece of stale toast, which she chewed slowly, she ran away from the kitchen. Actually, she was trying to escape from the omnipresent advertisements glorifying food, from social responsibilities and expectations, from the habits of the consumerist society. What were lavish parties held for? Why was so much food bought and then thrown away? What were all the sugary and fatty snacks produced for?

Dressed in a loose black T-shirt and a baggy grey tracksuit with the hood up, she went for a walk in the park. Her image was not of someone comfortable and relaxed, but rather scruffy and awkward. There was nobody she would like to dress beautifully for. Who would care about such a miserable and unattractive creature? Whose attention could she capture? She would rather disappear from the lurid world, detach herself from fashion victims, and hide her imperfect body under loose-fitting clothes. It was impossible not to notice that passers-by were gaping at her. How did they dare to do this?! She hunched even deeper, her head lowered, her eyes fixed on the pavement.

According to her strategic plan, she was to do shopping on her way back. She had prepared a detailed list of necessities so as not to waste time on choosing the freshest fruit, the crispest vegetables and packets of wholegrain cereals. But despite having the detailed list, she always

spent a considerable amount of time in the supermarket. Time flew unnoticed when she was deeply engaged in examining products' nutrition facts and calories.

'I'm a healthy choice. I'm sugar-free and fat-free,' boasted a pot of natural yogurt.

'How dare you call yourself yogurt? Chap, you're ... you're everything-free, even taste-free!' a strawberry yogurt retorted heatedly. 'I'm a genuine yogurt made of full-cream milk and with extra large fruit pieces. I'm tasty and nutritious.'

'Pick me! Pick me! You desperately want to enjoy my sweet flavour, don't you? You can smell my sweet scent, can't you? You crave to taste me, don't you?' a bar of chocolate was trying to cajole her.

'You have to overcome your craving. Sugar is for those weak and unsuccessful,' claimed a bitter grapefruit.

Feeling disgusted with the shopping ordeal, she wished to escape from the supermarket. After buying a white grapefruit and one pot of fat-reduced yogurt, she decided to carry on walking in the park. But a sudden feeling of dizziness and faintness made her collapse on the first bench. Thoughts were passing through her mind without her being conscious of them. Definitely, as a grown-up and well-educated woman, she should think about other things apart from food. It would be advisable to consider the political situation in the world, or the proverbial starving children of Africa. Yes, she should remember that there were children dying of poverty, malnutrition, or famine every day. Admittedly,

she could eat whatever and whenever she wanted, but she refused to take advantage of these possibilities. Was she fair to the famished? Was she insane? No. She would rather consider herself a strong-willed runaway winner over food.

When she finally came back to her flat, the clock was chiming six p.m., which meant that it was too late to eat dinner. It seemed that this unpleasant activity had to be put off until tomorrow, until tomorrow noon, until tomorrow afternoon, until never. Weak with hunger, she lay down on her bed. The lack of carbohydrates made her doze off. She was dreaming about the ultimate escape from the physiological weaknesses of a human being, and about a daring escape from the burden of eating five times a day, every day, three hundred sixty five days a year, over one's entire life. What a torment!

In the faint light, she was fully occupied with scrutinising her excessively roundish body reflected in the large angular mirror. The reflection staring back at her could not be the person she used to be, the person she should be, the person she wanted to become. A feeling of self-hatred crept over her when she glanced at the clothes hangers and noticed her favourite jeans. They used to belong to her. They used to be worn by her. They used to make her bottom and thighs look attractive. Now the jeans were abandoned, useless and unwearable. Should she throw them away? Should she squeeze them into the darkest and most rarely opened drawer? Should she cut them into thin shreds? The last vision was the most tempting one.

All of a sudden, she saw a greyish insect flying towards her. In the stillness of her room, even the sound of tiny, transparent wings could be heard. A clothes moth perched on her bony shoulder and fixed her with its gaze.

‘Hello Amy,’ the moth shattered the deathly silence.

She stared at it in astonishment. ‘What do you want from me?’ she asked, agitated.

‘It has occurred to me that in your wardrobe there are a number of items of clothing which you do not don anymore, and I am wondering whether you would allow me to nibble at them so that I could satisfy my appetite.’

‘No! Don’t you dare touch my clothes!’ she screamed hysterically.

‘I would like to point out that taking into consideration the fact that they are ill-fitting...’

‘No! Get off!’

‘Behave yourself! You are acting like a spoiled child.’

‘No! I don’t!’

‘Could you stop being such a dog in the manger?’

‘No! Piss off!’

‘Pardon my asking, but are you going to leave all your clothes for the coming generations after your death?’

‘After what?!’ She was entirely flabbergasted.

‘Excuse me. You look neither particularly healthy nor fully fit.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘You cannot wear your favourite jeans because, I beg your pardon, they fall through your skinny thighs and your bony buttocks.’



‘Leave me alone!’ she yelled furiously. Tears escaped from her hollow eyes and rolled down her sunken cheeks.

‘Hurry up to wear your garments before I have devoured them to the last thread,’ the clothes moth laughed derisively and flew away.

Amy was left alone. She took a glance at her silhouette reflected in the mirror. It might be that the mirror became more roundish. It might be that her body seemed to be more angular. It might be that she had never been overweight. She glowered at her frail body again. There was no escaping who she was.

Although it was late evening, she forced herself to order a large pizza with double cheese, extra tomato sauce and a bottle of non-diet coke. While she was unwrapping the delivery, a sudden feeling of suspicion crept over her: was she committing a grave sin? But she somehow managed not to run away. Sniffing the air filled with the mouth-watering scent of her pizza, she indulged herself with the lavish meal, which she gulped greedily, not allowing it to cool. At least once since a very long time, her stomach was full and her hunger satisfied. She felt determined not to let the clothes moth devour her favourite jeans. What she wanted above everything else in the world was to wear them again. Yes, she desired to wear them. What if she takes the jeans in...?



Dagmara Hadyna  
**Insert the Galaxies**

SPACE

Peering into the twin pits darkening in the milky whites, it was like taking a peek through a Judas hole. Looking at space without a telescope. You could see two perfectly symmetrical nebulas of copper, auburn, olive and dark yellow, with a pitch black, round centre.

Fascinating, really.

‘Your eyes are like galaxies,’ I said, mesmerized. Immediately, reasonable thinking kicked in and made me stutter and mutter, ‘Don’t get me wrong, I know it sounds silly and tacky. But all those colours. You have the final frontier right here in your irises.’

He laughed.

BACKSPACE

I didn’t really think it would work out. I thought it was just another drunken escapade which I was going to regret later, another nightly moonstruck mistake, but nonetheless, a nice interlude between these sorry songs. You see, I had a soul that had been longing too long, aching for any attention, pining for even the tiniest morsel of feeling at that time.

The things I’d done up till then were a train wreck of disasters and catastrophes. I could brag about them

all night long, trying to mask the pain with copious amounts of distance and irony, incisive comments and razor-sharp humour. I could sit at a table with a pint of beer and chatter away, baring my naivety to the bone, jeering at my puppy-eyed affections and blind choices, the secret love letters and poems, lost kisses and pitiful embraces, lamentable nights and hopeless dawns, the tears on the stairs early in the morning when all the effort and frustration, and anticipation, and wishes, and dreams, and yearnings turned to ashes, vain, and void—infinately stupid.

Somebody once told me that I was like that bottle cap which unexpectedly fired high into the sky, violent and mad, like that time when I was trying to learn how to open a beer with a pocket knife. That I'm going to explode, and then burn down and purge the whole neighbouring district when somebody finally opens me.

I used to drink too much then; I used to bottle up all of my inner lusty demons.

I didn't even realise something hit me; he was suddenly right there, precisely in the middle of my life, pushing and shoving, licking sauce off my fingers after a meal, pinning me to walls and furniture, driving me crazy and leaving me panting with want.

Devoting time and undivided attention to me, sharing all the things he loved, a little shy about what I might think about him.

Saying he liked me with and without make-up, admiring me with and without glasses, marvelling at me in my best clothes and in the worse rags I wore at home.

Kissing so hard on that tram stop that we missed our ride.

Laying his head trustingly on my lap so I could slowly get accustomed to his face, wonder at the outline of his mouth, lips so soft, full and shapely, get to know his wide nose and dark hair, try to guess the colour of his eyes, air-draw the lines of his eyebrows, decide which parts of his face I liked best, discover the unobvious wonders and miniature galaxies.

INSERT

I decided we should go on, straight ahead of us, up the long street. In one hand he was holding a coffee. In the other hand he was holding my hand.

Even if we had tried really hard, we probably couldn't have refrained from grinning.

Concrete paving slabs dating back to the communist times were flaking and crumbling under our feet. I've known the pattern of their worn-down teeth under my soles all too well. I've walked this way a thousand times already. All these nights I trod these slabs, looking straight down at the tips of my shoes moving up and forward and down and behind, and forward and down and behind. My shiny black heels, my ridiculous red heels, my plain black and white trainers. Passing the same feeling of lonesomeness, despair, all-pervading gloom; the same shop windows, the same turnings, the same cross-streets.

Crushing the same pavement under my heels, twisting and hurting my legs on their concrete teeth.

Swallowing my tears, my fears, my failed feats.

Collapsing in front of my great grandma's mirror at four in the morning, make-up smeared, streaking in black smutches down my face, face contorted, ugly and comical in its reflection. You're foul and fat and obnoxious. You're loathsome. Nobody will ever want you. Most definitely this one guy you dressed up for tonight. Forget about him. Just look at this fat on your belly, at your round face, your absurd dress you loved so much just a couple of hours ago, turning around and pouting your lips in front of your own reflection.

I squeezed his hand a little harder. The map of my life's failures bluntly delineated on the pavement flashing in front of my eyes.

He grabbed me, brought closer.

His lips were warm and soft and they smelled of coffee beans.

You know those old-fashioned tapes? You can record a new song on the old track, right? The same tape, a new song. Every new step on this route was like a millimetre of tape being re-recorded.

Or better still, he caught me by surprise like this treacherous little key on a computer keyboard. It eats up the words you've already written, replacing them with your new text. You need to press "Control" plus "Z" to go back and retrieve the old text and lose the new.

I was in full control right now, I didn't need to press anything. I wanted him to keep on inserting himself into my life. Rewriting my soundtrack.

## CONTROL

A couple of months back. Out of control. Drifting. Allowing to be taken wherever the current of events would direct me.

My foot was crawling slowly under the table. Little, dirty worm. Slow, slimy thoughts. Up the loafer, up the sock, up the folds of his jeans. Toes finding the characteristic bulge. Rubbing deliberately, leisurely.

His eyes avoiding mine. His hands nervous, slinking on the countertop. White, elongated maggots. His whole demeanour getting uneasy. Covertly bursting with desire.

The moment he stopped talking to the noise surrounding us and lifted his eyes, the frame froze.

Then his croaky murmur in my ear. His coarse hand on my thighs. A lump swelling under his clothes, a lump swelling in my throat.

Steps leading upstairs, the abandoned room.

We knew we had little time, the owner would return soon. The door closing with an indulgent click.

Alien sheets on the bed creasing under our weight. A cocoon of white. The uncertainty hidden underneath a thick layer of broken wit and false boldness.

His reactions strange and surprising. The guidance a bit too condescending, a bit too indifferent.

Curiosity getting the best of me, pushing another and another step further. Maggots swarming on my belly, comfortable darkness closing in on my body. Inquisitive hands creeping slowly down and down and down.

'You would make a good rider,' he remarked, me on top of him.

Blushing pride bloating deep inside.

'You should take these off now, you know?'

'Sorry, I... I can't. Not yet perhaps.'

Disappointment written all over his face.

'A shame. Sometime in the future then.'

The sound of somebody's steps on the staircase. Laughter. Handle moving down. More laughter. Knocking.

'We know you're in there. Cut it, come out, you dirty shameless bastards. Find yourselves another place.'

Shamed, half-naked, getting dressed quickly.

Walking out of the house seen off by giggles and jeers. Almost no words exchanged.

Him, leading me up the dark street. The city murmuring distantly, almost asleep. Winding lanes up the hill, a church towering above us judgingly, magnificent and erect. A murky alley leading to a shadowy place, almost impossible to make out in the darkness. Dark frames of trees obscuring the clear sky, branches pulling my hair, hooking on to my clothes. The ground uneven under my feet, the asphalt full of potholes. Unsure where we are heading, being led by the hand into stranger and stranger darkness.

A crude, rugged wall of a lone, free-standing building behind his back. His eyes just a glassy blink reflecting dimly in the night. Our hands dancing again.

'You could... well, you know.'



Out of control, I could. I did. Kneeled down, down into the well of undisclosed wishes. Long bottled-up desires swelling, building, swelling, seething out into the darkness, bubbling up, overflowing, spilling all over, spitting salty drops straight from my tongue down on the dark, dark soil.

Unsure what to feel now, his smell intoxicating. Breathing in the aroma of his sweat, his taste strange and unfamiliar.

‘Why are you smelling me? Stop it, it’s ridiculous,’ he laughed awkwardly as we rode through the city in the tram.

My eyes wistful, as if I had seen a promise of the Promised Land, a scrap of heaven.

All the dreams and visions of a sweet reclusive time we would spend together during the summer months building up in my mind. Perfect bliss within the reach of my hand. Just need to grab it.

All of that crashed down the next time we met. No hugs, no kisses, no sweet smiles. Two total strangers helping each other out, eyes never meeting again, bodies never ever touching.

HOME

I led him purposefully by the hand. A firm, obsessive grip.

‘Where are you taking me? Where are we going?’

I shook my head, obstinate and silent.

I dragged him out into the fresh air under the starless city sky. Party sounds and loud music were

dying behind us gradually as we were going forward. Cobblestones shiny and smooth lit by the upright streetlights marking our way. Our feet sliding on their surface, steps careful, hands holding tightly.

‘It’s a nice church, isn’t it?’ I remarked matter-of-factly, turning into a narrow alley.

‘Well, yeah, sort of. A normal one, I’d say. Have you brought me here to see the church?’

‘No.’

‘Thought so. You’re not even looking at it.’

A puzzled silence. His hand warm in mine. We were marching uphill now, the street rising sharply.

‘What are we going to see, then?’

‘This way,’ I said, leading him into a dark way into a pitch-black space, trees towering silently above us.

‘What is this place?’ he asked, bewildered.

‘That’s the thing, I don’t know.’

We stopped when the darkness shrouded us so perfectly we weren’t able to even recognise what’s in front of us. We just knew our own two hot bodies in the cool of the night, searching for touch, for assurance, for safety.

Slowly, the total blackness around us started to take shape of a large, asphalted clearing among trees.

‘It’s a car park?’

‘It seems so.’

‘What are those?’ I asked, pointing at some structures in the back.

We approached them slowly, his arm making sure I tread carefully enough not to stumble on the uneven ground.

‘Some ... garages?’

‘Yup. Nothing to do here. Unless...’

He swung me around, his face suddenly in front of mine. His eyes glowing in the dark, curious, hopeful, eager. His mouth soft and willing, melting under my kiss.

I embraced him tightly for a moment before I could untangle myself and step aside.

‘Give me just a minute. I need to check something.’

‘As you wish, m’lady. I’ll be waiting, although I have but one petite condition.’

‘What is that?’

‘You’ll tell me what this is all about.’

I dismissed him with an impatient hand wave and went on to explore the place. It was ugly, really. Some cars were parked here and there, the garages were so old the paint and distasteful graffiti was flaking, the asphalt was crumbling, the trees were ordinary and sad. The wall was there all right. But it was what it was: a vulgar, dark place.

‘I don’t even care now, surprisingly enough,’ I commented.

‘About what?’

‘Oh, you know,’ I laughed offhandedly, chin held up high, taking the whole place in. ‘It doesn’t matter now. I really, actually, truly do not care.’

‘I love when you do this. You won’t ever finish what you start saying, will you?’

I came back to him and looked up honestly.

‘I’m sorry. I was drawn to this place. I had to go back. I needed to check if it is still the way I remem-

bered it and then rewrite it with some new memories. Will you help me with that?’

‘What about the previous memories? Are they that bad?’

‘Not particularly pleasant, no.’

‘My poor baby.’

He hugged me gently and soothingly, rocking my head nestled right under his cheek. I immersed myself again in the warm, blissful sea of mead-like feeling, safe in the galactic iris of his eye. We froze for a long moment, one statue and two beating hearts.

‘Any other places you’d like to “rewrite”?’

I thought about it for a moment.

‘Follow me,’ I commanded. ‘We need to insert those galaxies,’ I added inaudibly to myself, looking up.

Alicja Lasak, Katarzyna Biela

## **Realism vs Fantasy:**

### **Exploration of Readers' Perception**

Fantasy appears to be a particularly important genre for contemporary writers, scholars and readers. It suffices to take a short walk to a bookshop or open any creative blog to observe this tendency. Gwenda Bond points out that also TV shows and video games “reflect a [...] preference for fantastical settings and stories” (29). Later she writes that “fantasy has conquered popular culture, and the successes are continuing to build on a final frontier: literary fiction” (29). Indeed, when we think of fantasy novels and stories nowadays, we may come up with a plethora of authors. We can enumerate classic writers such as J. R. R. Tolkien or Andrzej Sapkowski, but it is clear that many others, including novices, also choose this genre. Bond quotes the editor Edward Kastenmeier who assumes that “there’s always been fantasy in literature, and children’s literature was accepted as literature, but now we’re seeing people incorporate fantasy aspects into mainstream literature without being marginalized” (30). Series such as Rick Riordan’s *Percy Jackson and the Olympians*, Veronica Roth’s *Divergent* trilogy or Suzanne Collins’s *The Hunger Games* can serve as examples that these statements truly reflect the tastes of today’s readership. All three were sold in numerous copies and turned into box office

hits when they were adapted for screen. It appears that fantasy offers great opportunities for authors and enables them to form a successful relationship with the addressee. The addressee being not only bookworms, but also those who open a book less frequently or enjoy going to the cinema.

Significantly, the growing interest in fantasy literature is also reflected in this anthology, which includes the best stories from the Press Any Key competition. Each participant was supposed to choose one function key from the computer keyboard and use it as a theme in his or her short story. Nine of eleven short stories (i.e. virtually 82% of the content) take place in an unrealistic world or include some supernatural elements. The authors of “Voyage” and “Insert the Galaxies” follow the tradition of realistic stories while the others decided to make use of fantasy to present the themes inspired by computer keys. This observation inspired us to explore readers’ perception of realistic and fantasy stories. We would like to discuss differences in reading the two kinds of fiction and discover what determines the process of recognizing a story as fantasy. However, before we present how the specific elements of the imaginary world of fantasy influence a reader, we would like to mention a few general characteristics of this genre.

## 1. WHAT IS FANTASY?

### 1.1 Terminological Confusion

Despite the growing interest in fantasy, literary scholars still keep searching for one exhaustive definition of the

genre. Tolkien even believes that finding it is impossible. He writes that Faërie—"the realm or state in which fairies have their being"—"cannot be caught in a net of words; for it is one of its qualities to be indescribable, though not imperceptible" (14–15). Therefore, it seems that, although writing and reading fantasy is possible, capturing it in theoretical terms might be beyond our reach. Paradoxically, this could be a reason why the genre appears so tempting and exciting.

Problems with defining fantasy start from establishing clear and consistent terminology. Most of the dictionaries of literary terms treat fantasy as a general term for non-mimetic stories. According to *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, we may use the term for "any kind of fictional work that is not primarily devoted to realistic representation of the known world. The category includes several literary genres (e.g. dream vision, fable, fairy tale, romance, science fiction) describing imagined worlds in which magical powers and other impossibilities are accepted" (95). In *A Glossary of Literary Terms* by M. H. Abrams we read that science fiction and fantasy "encompass novels and short stories that represent an imagined reality that is radically different in its nature and functioning from the world of our ordinary experience" (278). A similar definition appears in *Creative Writing: A Guide and Glossary to Fiction Writing* by Colin Bulman (94–95). However, the authors of *The Routledge Dictionary of Literary Terms* offer a slightly different approach. "A variety of fictional works which use the supernatural or apparently

supernatural and functioning from the world of our ordinary experience” is referred to as “the fantastic”, while “works of fantasy, such as Tolkien’s fiction and C. S. Lewis’s Narnia series, create their own coherently organized worlds and myths” (82). Interestingly, the term “the fantastic” can be looked up also in *Oxford Dictionary*, but there it means “a mode of fiction in which the possible and the impossible are confounded so as to leave the reader (and often the narrator and/or central character) with no consistent explanation for the story’s strange events” (94).

An overview of the definitions offered by the dictionaries reveals a confusion in regard to terminology. It seems that the roots of the problem are in the fact that we try to merge two different issues in one term. On the one hand, we deal with the category that includes non-mimetic works as opposed to the realistic ones; on the other hand, there is the question of genre. The latter is a narrower category, which includes science fiction, myth and utopia, while the former is much broader and encompasses all of the above-mentioned text types as well as other genres. Indeed, Gary Wolfe recognizes this as one of the major questions concerning fantasy: “A second problem with the term is the ongoing debate over whether it [fantasy] properly refers to a large narrative genre encompassing such subgenres as science fiction and horror, or whether these subgenres are in fact distinct” (271).

The same misunderstanding is present not only in dictionaries. Scholars also mean different things when



they speak of fantasy with regard to the non-mimetic. For example, Jason Marc Harris opts for a more general meaning and states that “literary fantasy is a consistent representation of the unreal: the unreal becomes the real in the context of the narrative” (2), whereas Darko Suvin places the term among science fiction, myth, fairytale, and pastoral (23). Fiona Kelleghan presents yet another perspective. In her view, “fantasy [...] has an established meaning in the parlance of modern literary marketing. Part of that meaning is ‘not the same as science fiction’” (1). She refers us to The International Association for the Fantastic in the Arts, which suggest the term

“the fantastic” as a broader label to set against the very large categories of “history” and “fiction”. This label covers both modern fantasy and modern science fiction, taking in as well the ancestor genres of fairy tale, romance, myth, legend, ghost story, and many others. Stories of “the fantastic” may be defined as including any set in a world different from our own or that include elements recognized as alien to our own, things that are not true or not yet true. The dominant modern branches of the fantastic are fantasy and science fiction, but the fantastic includes genres older than either of them (Kelleghan, 1).

The terminological confusion seems overwhelming. Since in this article we aim to discuss differences in readers’ response to realistic and unrealistic stories, we decided to use the term “fantasy” as an umbrella term referring to non-mimetic works, set in imaginary, unrealistic worlds, or containing such elements as part of their setting.

## 1.2 Origins of the Term

Another problem arises when it comes to determining the origins of fantasy. It seems that nothing certain can be said about its roots, nevertheless a close look into the sources enables us to find some instances of early usage of the term “fantasy”. According to the author of *The Lord of The Rings*, the genre might be as old as language because “the mind that thought of light, heavy, grey, yellow, still, swift, also conceived of magic that would make heavy things light and able to fly, turn grey lead into yellow gold, and the still rock into swift water” (Tolkien, 24). The title of his essay “On Fairy-Stories”, delivered as a lecture at St. Andrew’s University in 1939 (*Wired.com*, par. 1) and then published in 1947 in *Essays Presented to Charles Williams (Tolkien Gateway)*, suggests that fantasy can be traced back to fairy tales. Tolkien illustrates “the history of stories and especially of fairy-stories” with “the Cauldron of Story”, in which themes and characters, both historical and fictional, are mixed up (28). We should not forget about mythology, legends and folklore suggested by Laetz and Johnston as another source of the genre (164). On the other hand, Michael W. McClinton remarks that

the distinction of fantasy from other sorts of narrative is not ancient. Although “fantasy” was used to mean some sort of fiction as early as the fourteenth century, the word more often denominated a mental activity or faculty. The appearance of “fantasist” and, with it, the clear sense of fantasies as intentional products of craft or art

is recent; the earliest citation of “fantasist” in the Oxford English Dictionary supplement—it does not appear in the dictionary proper—is from 1923, when it was used of Oscar Wilde (27).

Gary Wolfe, who presents a historical spectrum of definitions of fantasy, notes that the first usage of the term was by E. M. Forster in 1927 (272). When Brian Attebery discusses the history of science fiction in *The Cambridge Companion to Science Fiction*, he mentions a periodical whose title features the term “fantasy”, namely *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction* founded in 1949 (41). This gives us a clue about the narrower usage of the word soon after it came into use as a generic term. The term grew more and more popular: first it was included in the supplement to the *OED* in 1923, and later became familiar enough to appear in essays, and form a part of a magazine title.

### 1.3 Characteristic Features of Fantasy

Perhaps what is even more important for us than its origins are the characteristics of fantasy as a genre. Listing those would be useful as we try to discover how people recognize unrealistic stories and how they perceive them. However, we should not hope to be capable of providing a satisfactory and unambiguous catalogue of features. As we have already discovered in the discussion on terminology and origins, fantasy is a complicated and complex phenomenon, which scholars still disagree about.

Tolkien supposes that no specific characteristics of this genre can be enumerated and offers only a very general description that stresses its thematic content: “For the moment I will say only this: a ‘fairy-story’ is one which touches on or uses *Faërie*, whatever its own main purpose may be: satire, adventure, morality, fantasy<sup>1</sup>” (15). He opts for generalizations. One of the few concrete provisions he makes is that “travellers’ tales”, stories revolving around dreams and beast-fables should not be described as fantasy (15–18). This means that what exists on the Earth, even if it seems strange and could be found only in a remote part of the world, should be excluded from fantasy. Tolkien expresses a similar opinion about any productions of the human mind as well as symbols used to present reality by means of unnatural phenomena.

However, Laetz and Johnston find Tolkien’s distinction difficult to comprehend. They offer a different approach based on a list of features that, in their opinion, might help to discover what fantasy actually is. They propose that, for example, stories within this genre ought to be “essentially fictional” (162). Moreover, elements such as “wizards and dragons must be prominent in the work” (162). They should not be

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1 It may be worth noticing that this quote is the only instance of Tolkien making use of the term “fantasy” in the essay. As we can observe, it is placed along with different genres, while “fairy-story” functions as the opposite of “realistic”. This adds another perspective to the discussion of terminology. “Fairy-story” is the historical equivalent of the present term “fantasy” denoting “non-mimetic”.

treated as symbols for realistic things, “be mocked” or connected with the absurd (162–163) but function as integral elements of the plot. For the authors “fantasy either requires supernatural content or content that audiences take as supernatural” (164). In addition, such stories “must involve a lot of action” and “inspire wonder” (166–167). From this point of view, writing a fantasy story means creating a fictional world where unrealistic characters play a crucial part. The role of a reader is of great importance as their knowledge becomes the point of reference according to which the writer assumes what is supernatural and what is not. The world created in a story requires a specific kind of independence. It is supposed to function on its own rather than create a symbol, allegory, or part of satire. Laetz and Johnston’s criteria are much stricter than Tolkien’s, but what all these authors emphasize is the unrealistic content that differs from what readers know and expect on the basis of their everyday experience.

Gooderham also disagrees with Tolkien. According to him, excluding some kind of stories is just a categorization which “provides no more than lists of typical ingredients and conventions for each of the subgenres” (172). He would like to search for “fundamental structures” and proposes “an anatomy” that, apart from listing parts, “aims to describe their functional relationship” (172). Gooderham is convinced that “fantasy is a metaphorical mode” since it indirectly confronts children with different aspects of the human condition,

e.g. staying secure by one's mother, taking a risk or finding one's identity (173). In his view, readers should look for deeper senses in elements of fantasy rather than the complete escape from reality which some tend to seek in stories about fairies as well as other supernatural creatures and phenomena. It contrasts with Laetz and Johnston's assumption that elements of fantasy are not symbols or vehicles for presenting other themes (162). Furthermore, there is some doubt whether unrealistic characters or places can be instruments for conveying mockery or the absurd. As it has been mentioned above, Laetz and Johnston disagree with such an approach, while Tolkien grants permission to all literary purposes, among which he mentions "satire, adventure, morality" (15).

#### 1.4 The Intended Audience

The question whether fantasy may be treated as a disguised illustration of reality leads us to the question of the addressee of such stories. Gooderham discusses differences between children's and adults' response to fantasy stories. He believes that "adolescent and adult readers find no difficulty in responding to [...] metaphors of self-realization" while "preadolescent readers" may have problems with identifying deeper meanings in a story. They rather "enjoy *The Hobbit* and [...] recall with enthusiasm the hole house, the trolls, goblins, and wargs" (181). Other authors also take this issue into account. Tolkien quotes Andrew Lang, who wrote in *Fairy Books* that younger, inexperienced audience is able to believe that

events described in a fictional story could take place in reality (36). They might also be more easily delighted by supernatural elements of the story since children often ask others whether what they read about is true (36). However, this does not mean that fantasy stories should not be recommended to adults. Tolkien assumes that it is the writer's task to make the fantasy world credible for all readers (36–37). Laetz and Johnston also consider readership in their discussion. They suppose that adults often do not experience wonder, which is characteristic of children, but “it is likely that many fantasy authors are completely aware of this” (169).

Therefore, credibility seems to be a key aspect of fantasy stories. Chapell remarks that writers must try to make their stories convincing in the first place (182). They should think of the effect of fantasy elements and treat them as means to present the character's personality (183–184). Depicting unrealistic elements and speculating about their nature is not enough. Showing an imaginary world should have a purpose and enable the writer to say what he or she intends to say (187). Chapell claims that the author “is aware that he has counted heavily upon the forbearance of his audience, and he is anxious to compensate” (186). He advises to avoid “Disneyfying” a story: presenting fake emotions, searching for “trivial” literary solutions and overusing supernatural elements (185). According to him, fantasy should come naturally and be united with good style (188). What is interesting is that he recommends

including a realistic detail in a fantasy story in order to achieve logic and coherence (186–188). He is sure this can be done without “damaging the spiritual atmosphere of a story” (188). Likewise, Gooderham is in favour of combining supernatural elements with those we know from everyday life (180). As we can see, scholars have not reached a conclusion in the discussion on the presence of realistic elements in fantasy.

As it transpires, today’s readers get more and more interested in a genre that has not been clearly defined yet, whose origins are obscure, and whose number of subgenres remains unspecified. Some researchers try to enumerate its specific features, while others refrain from ultimate definitions and formulate general assumptions instead. The question whether a fantasy world can be used as an instrument for conveying truths about reality remains unanswered. What seems clear is that the imaginary world ought to be convincing and that the readership of fantasy stories is not limited to children. According to researchers, unrealistic characters and places form the crucial part of a fantasy story. Bearing these assumptions in mind, we will analyze how different elements of a narrative influence the reader. It is vital to pose the question when, while reading a story, readers realize that they deal with a fantasy world. To provide the answer, we will take into consideration the cognitive process unfolding in readers’ minds. The cognitive process is presented according to Catherine Emmott’s cognitive poetic analysis applied in “Reading



for Pleasure”. Stories included in the present anthology are used as a representative sample to conduct the exploration of reader’s perception.

## 2. THE COGNITIVE PROCESS

### 2.1 A Fantasy World vs the Real World

In a comparison of realistic and fantasy stories, it should be mentioned that readers have certain expectations and presuppositions. These are confronted with the actual content once they start reading. The question is at which point and under what circumstances readers realize that a story unfolds in a fantasy world. Emmott develops a “contextual frame theory” to examine the extent to which readers’ knowledge, beliefs, assumptions and inference-making ability are involved in interpreting and understanding words on pages (146). In the case of both a realistic story and a fantasy story, such inferences may prove false. However, fantasy stories seem to offer much more unexpected twists. In the course of reading, readers can come to the realization that they should treat a work of fiction more seriously or, on the contrary, take it with a pinch of salt.

Approaching a text in terms of cognition entails seeking a point of reference. People are prone to make inferences about the narrow context of a story by referring it to the broader context of the world they know. As Emmott posits, readers perform “contextual monitoring” by making “frame assumptions” about specific narrative contexts (146). In other words, at least ini-

tially, they assume the fictional world to be governed by the same rules as the world they are familiar with. While reading, people generate mental representations and compare them with the known reality. It should be noted that the primary assumption is as follows: the story is going to be a realistic one. Not until the fictional world has been confronted with initial assumptions may the text be classified as a fantasy story. To be more specific, readers use their cognitive abilities to make presuppositions based on information provided in the text. Emmott calls these “projected frames”, produced in the process of reading (148). In this regard, mental representations are created in readers’ minds and, during the subsequent stages of reading, they are re-evaluated and re-defined. Thus, the process of interpreting and understanding a text requires mental effort and active involvement. Interpreting fictional characters and events entails comparing them to one’s personal experiences and conceptualizing them on the basis of prior knowledge. It should be borne in mind that the ability to draw inferences is individual-bound. That is to say, every reader is endowed with different qualities and has acquired commonly shared knowledge to a greater or lesser extent.

In fact, to comprehend the underlying meaning of a written work is readers’ task. As Chatman contends, the drawing of inferences by the reader should not be neglected and deserves to be identified as interpretation (31). Readers can handle a text by choosing from

a selection of contexts relevant in specific circumstances and, at the same time, disregarding alternative ones. While indulging themselves in reading, bookworms are furnished with both subtle and obvious clues that aid in identifying elements of fantasy. This is the point at which imagination becomes involved. Hazlett and Mag Uidhir point out that fictions are designed as invitations to imagine (35). In this regard, a person reading a fantasy story is positively encouraged to exercise his or her imagination. Thus, a fantasy story appears to have greater influence on one's cognitive process than a realistic story. The latter does not stimulate imagination to such an extent as the former does. Since the fantasy story is more remote from the mundane reality, it prompts a stronger and more imaginative response. However, readers' imagination is limited by the boundaries of a fantasy world. Therefore, to grasp the underlying meaning of images, it is necessary to find an adequate point of reference. In this sense, as mentioned above, the manner in which worlds of fiction are perceived is dependent on one's conception of the actual world. As Walton posits, readers respond to what they know about fictional worlds in a similar way that they respond to what they know about the real world (12). Although a fantasy world is created for the purpose of a story, the response of readership is based on real-life experience and, consequently, as genuine as in the real world. In this regard, people sympathise with protagonists, pass moral judgements on them

and regret that they cannot prevent fictional characters from committing mistakes. Correspondingly, such interactions involve feelings; that is to say, readers can love, care about, detest or be afraid of fictitious figures.

Fantasy and realism are combined only in an abstract sense and can influence each other mainly as much as the powers of human imagination are concerned. In Tolkien's view: "Each of us is an allegory, embodied in a particular tale and clothed in the garments of time and place, universal truth and everlasting life" (qtd. in Chance 42). Thus, people carry their own stories with them and, in the process of reading, such stories are developed and enriched. It is not uncommon to regard fiction as a mirror of the everyday reality. In Lem's opinion, literature can signal the existence of real problems by means of apparently impossible occurrences or objects (qtd. in Hazlett and Mag Uidhir 43). Thus, readers can relate what they have already experienced to the events occurring in a fictional world. It may be assumed that the extent to which a story exerts impact on personal feelings and beliefs depends on the relation of an individual to the plot. It seems that readers prefer to immerse in a fantasy story. A sense of immersion in this type of text enhances readers' ability to shift their attention from everyday problems. Consequently, the sense of immersion reinforces their enjoyment in identifying with protagonists. Bookworms can imagine themselves adopting an elaborate disguise and having supernatural powers, which means that the boundary

between a fantasy world and the actual world may be blurred in one's mind. Tolkien alleges that literature, fantasy in particular, sub-creates a secondary world (qtd. in Chance 82). In this regard, once created, stories do not remain in isolation but are stored along with common knowledge. Correspondingly, bookworms may have the impression that they live in a multidimensional mental world, in which the limits of possibility are extended. Thus, fantasy stories can expand readers' horizons and contribute to shaping their perception of the world.

## 2.2 The Elements of Narrative

Every story is composed of two elements: content, that is a chain of events or actions, and existents, that is characters and items of the setting (Chatman 19). Information about the plot, the setting and characters can aid readers in identifying whether it is a realistic or a fantasy story. While reading, they conjure certain images in their minds. As Emmott states, the cognitive aspect of reading is reinforced by stylistic indicators which may supply readers with more obvious clues (158). By deciphering vital clues readers realize what kind of a story they are dealing with. Either this realization comes to them gradually, or it dawns on them suddenly.

Shifting attention back to narrative elements, they are analysed in this article in order to determine the moment at which readers realize that they read a fantasy story. As Emmott points out, a written text rarely specifies all the major parameters of its context, such as its main characters, key objects, time and

place, in every sentence (147). Readers have to search for vital clues throughout the text. In the course of reading, they become familiar with certain points in the narrative, namely: the author, the title, characters, the setting and twists in the tale. It can also happen that one of the above-mentioned parameters is not present in a story, for example time or place is not specified, which may complicate the reader's identification of the type of the story. To illustrate the analysis of readers' perception, examples from stories included in this anthology are provided.

First of all, readers are confronted with the name of an author. Certainly, it is easier to grasp the meaning of a story when both the author's biography and the circumstances of writing a literary work are familiar. However, it may happen that readers encounter a story by a person who is not well-known. An anthology of stories written by aspiring writers is a case in point. The process of inferring the meaning of such stories is limited to the texts themselves. This is connected with the fact that readers are not acquainted with the subgenre of a particular story before starting to read it. While becoming engrossed in a world of fiction, readers discover important clues which enable them to specify the genre or the subgenre of a text.

Secondly, readers perceive the title of a story and attempt to predict the types of senses communicated in it. Certainly, when they come across titles such as "Angelology 101" or "Insert the Galaxies", they are

likely to assume that the story is going to be set in a fantasy realm. However, are their presuppositions confirmed? In "Angelology 101", their expectations are fulfilled and the story is indeed about angels. "Insert the Galaxies" confounds their expectations since the story concerns an ordinary relationship, and the term "galaxies" serves as a metaphor for the eyes. The false presupposition results from the fact that people tend to compare what they read to the real world. Accordingly, they take it for granted that rules governing the universe in a story are identical to those governing reality.

Next, readers become acquainted with the setting of a story. As Chatman claims, readers fill gaps in the text so as to adjust events and existents to each other in order to form a coherent whole, even when ordinary life expectations are called into question (49). Regarding time, it can be clearly indicated in the opening lines: "Right, what do we have here? The 26<sup>th</sup> century where people travel through stars and meet aliens at bars?" ("A Vicious Circle" 93). It can also be briefly mentioned by means of a short note in a letter: "year: 2566" ("Rusty" 92). In both cases the date indicates a setting characteristic for science fiction or fantasy; but such a detail can also indicate a prolepsis. Yet it should be noticed that neither flashbacks nor flash-forwards are genre-bound. The passing of time can also be manipulated in realistic stories. However, it is only possible within the frame of a fantasy world to turn back in time, as in "Angelology 101", or to present humankind in a remote future, as in "A Vicious Circle" or "Rusty".

Concerning the place where the plot unfolds, it tends to vary between a realistic story and a fantasy story. The latter is likely to be set in space, as in “A Vicious Circle,” or in a non-specific celestial sphere, as in “Angelology 101”. A fantasy story offers an unlikely setting, and immaterial products of an imaginative mind, which distinguishes it from a realistic text. Tolkien gives the following reason for creating a fantasy setting: “I had a mind to make a body of more or less connected legend, ranging from the large and cosmogonic to the level of romantic fairy-story—the larger founded on the lesser in contact with the earth, the lesser drawing splendour from the vast backcloths” (cited by Chance 1). It seems that Tolkien’s intention was to create, through references to myths and legends, a world only loosely connected to reality. Undoubtedly, a fantasy setting opens up possibilities for extending the boundaries of imagination.

As far as characters in a short story are concerned, for the sake of narrative economy, the main protagonist is usually introduced in the first lines. To take a few examples from the anthology:

“Leonard has never been to this part of town before.”  
 (“Crimson” 123)

“Emily had her sandy blonde hair done in two plaits, and nothing could unnerve Ronald more than this sight.”  
 (“The Voyage” 71)

“It is unclear how the Man found the shop.”  
 (“Shopkeeper” 17)



In the first two examples, Leonard, Emily and Ronald are quite ordinary names, which can be heard in the street. The Man from the last example is a fantastic character who can be interpreted as an Everyman. Besides these, more peculiar figures appear in the stories as well. As Colatrella notes, contemporary works of fiction frequently revolve around technology, vampires, ghosts and angels (556). This collection is a case in point as it features such characters as vampires (“Crimson”), ghosts (“The Phone Calls”) angels (“Angelology 101”) and robots (“A Vicious Circle”). Compared to realistic stories in which technology, folk beliefs and religion are present as well, fantasy stories allow mythological creatures and advanced technologies which are still to be developed, to coexist with ordinary human beings. Traits and skills displayed by fantasy figures may differ considerably from those displayed by realistic ones. However, readers of fantasy stories do not reject them because these are in tune with the conventions of the genre. Such traits and skills can be illustrated by examples of the shopkeeper selling dreams (“The Shopkeeper”) or a cloth moth speaking human language (“A Runaway”). Nevertheless, as in a realistic story, the primary focus remains on personal opinions held by characters as well as their ideas and feelings. It should be noted that, regardless of the genre, a protagonist serves as a vehicle for conveying feelings or opinions to readership.

Considering twists in a tale, they tend to confound readers' expectations. As Chatman writes, a chain of events may start with a surprise, develop into a pattern of suspense and then end with a twist, that is a frustration of the expected result, which means another surprise (60). Writers often generate suspense that leads to a type of frustrating revelation combined with an element of surprise. As a result, readers can feel surprised and satisfied with grasping the intended meaning, but at the same time frustrated and disappointed since the plot is at odds with their presuppositions. As far as fantasy stories are concerned, they may be identified by means of twists in a tale which violate the rules of the real world. To take one example, "Crimson" is about someone responding to a job advertisement that contains key phrases such as "blood" and "food scientist," which may be associated with a biochemist, but may sound a little disturbing due to the reference to blood. As a result, suspense builds up. Finally, the hero learns that his interviewers can "drink him dry," which leads to the revelation that it is not an ordinary job interview but rather an interview for a victim of vampires. To provide another example, "A Runaway..." begins like a realistic story about a woman who views herself as overweight and suffers from an eating disorder. However, food items suddenly start talking to her: "eat me", "I'm willing", which makes readers question her sanity. Next, she holds a conversation with an extremely polite cloth moth that requests the permission to eat her ill-fitting clothes.

At this point, it becomes obvious that it is not a realistic story and the initial expectations are defied. As Emmott contends, unexpected plot twists surprise readership not because they step outside real-world conventions but because they break “default assumptions” (150). In other words, events come as a surprise when the initial realistic assumptions turn out to be erroneous.

### 3. CONCLUSIONS

Although it is difficult to define fantasy as well as determine its origins and features, readers are certainly willing to choose fantasy works. They enjoy the cognitive effort to uncover and piece together clues contained in a text. It entails reconciling their perception of a fantasy world with their everyday experience of the real world. Such an operation influences them considerably. Tolkien describes three effects of fantasy stories: Recovery, Escape and Consolation (52–63). First of all, reading about unrealistic creatures and phenomena enables readers to imagine the familiar world expanded or enriched by unfamiliar elements, thus it offers them a refreshing glance. Secondly, it allows them to escape the overwhelming reality: conflicts, problems, negative emotions, weaknesses and death. Tolkien also mentions “disgust with man-made things” (60). He maintains that fantasy makes it possible to run away from industrial inventions such as electric street-lamps and factories (56–57). It would be interesting to know if today’s readers would like fantasy stories to take them away from e.g. technology and frequently updated

applications. We can suggest that every utopian story is a fantasy to some extent, so it is this genre that is used to express human expectations and desires. To balance these seemingly contradictory assumptions, we may say that fantasy stories enable us to try out new solutions. We can write and read about fantastical inventions and wonder if they would be useful in reality. The third effect of fantasy—Consolation—gives readers “the joy of the happy ending” and the denial of “universal final defeat” (62). According to the author of *The Hobbit*, the ending of every fantasy story should be optimistic. All these effects suggest that fantasy has a positive impact on the addressee. Rosemary Jackson agrees with Tolkien: “fantasy characteristically attempts to compensate for a lack resulting from cultural constraints: it is a literature of desire which seeks that which is experienced as absence and loss” (2).

The categories of Recovery, Escape and Consolation can be mapped onto the stories collected in the present anthology. The stories engage with the developing technology, which can be viewed as an invitation to discuss its positive and negative influence on humanity. Moreover, it is clear that at least some of the functional keys correspond with the above-listed effects of reading fantasy stories. ESCAPE is the first that comes to mind due to its name, which overlaps with one of Tolkien’s terms. Thanks to this key, we can exit a page or a program, just like by means of the Escape effect in fantasy we can run away from a depressing

reality. INSERT appears to be connected with Recovery as it allows to replace previously written signs with new ones. Keys like SHIFT, ALT, DELETE or BACKSPACE determine a change, and computer users intend it to be a change for the better—so it is a kind of recovery, too. Operations carried out by means of the keyboard are meant to satisfy the desire to control one's creation and finish it according to one's expectations so that a "happy ending" can be achieved. We may therefore risk a hypothesis that the number of fantasy stories in our anthology is not accidental. Some authors may have responded to this intuitively, and used fantasy as a good way to explore themes such as running away from the unpleasant, controlling one's surroundings and making changes, suggested by names of keyboard keys.

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